

# Ben Affleck Honored for Charity Work, Talks 'Awe-Inspiring' Experience in Congo

**Ben Affleck** took center stage at the Starkey Hearing Foundation awards gala in St. Paul, Minnesota, on Sunday night. The actor-director was honored at the annual star-studded charity gala for his longtime humanitarian work with **Eastern Congo Initiative**. Affleck tells PEOPLE that working with the Congolese people has been "one of the greatest, most awe-inspiring experiences of my life." (See more in his Q&A below.)

The Starkey Hearing Foundation, which brings hearing aids to people in need in the U.S. and around the world, raises millions of dollars with the annual event, where this year Steven Tyler and Darius Rucker performed.

In 2009, Affleck founded ECI, a grant-making and advocacy organization focused on investing in and working with the people of eastern Congo. One of the group's many projects has been partnering with the Starkey Hearing Foundation to bring life-changing hearing aids to people in the war-torn area.

Affleck, 44, who recently **went public with his romance** with *Saturday Night Live* producer **Lindsay Shookus**, 37, appeared solo at the awards gala.



Before the event, the father of three answered some questions for PEOPLE about his work in Congo:

**You visited Congo for the 10th time recently. Who were some of the most memorable people you met on that trip?**

Last month, I spent an afternoon with a group of women and girls in Goma who have survived horrific sexual violence. The youngest was just seven. It's stunning and unconscionable. But in the face of stigma and intimidation, these women and girls are working with our longtime local partner DFJ [**Dynamique des Femmes Juristes**, which advocates for women's rights] to bring about true justice. To stand up in court, not only on behalf of themselves, but their sisters, their daughters, their communities... You spend time with these women and girls — you hear their stories, and words like courage take new meaning.

**What do you tell your kids [Violet, 11, Seraphina, 8, and Samuel, 5] about your trips to Congo? How do you get them to relate to the people you're helping and to the work you're doing?**

Absolutely! I think helping my children expand their consciousness of other cultures, struggles, and issues outside of their own and outside of our country is one of the most important responsibilities I have as a parent and as a citizen — now more than ever. With each trip I take, I always try to keep in mind that I not only have a chance to encourage positive change in Congo when I go, but to also raise a level of appreciation, awareness, empathy and reciprocity from within my own home. For their part, my kids are amazing — always asking a million questions, wanting to see photos and hear stories. I can't wait for them to be old enough to experience Congo for themselves.

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A screenshot of Ben Affleck's Instagram post. The post features two photos: one of him interacting with a group of people in a rural setting, and another of him standing on a hillside overlooking a valley. The caption reads: "Seven years ago we founded @easterncongo to help provide the Congolese people with economic opportunities and a stable civil society. Last week I witnessed firsthand how hard work and sustainable investment is helping to achieve that goal. Special thanks to Howard G. Buffett Foundation &amp; @starbucks for supporting these coffee cooperatives." The post has 148.3k likes and 777 comments. The date is June 8. There are also two "Follow" buttons for the account.