



GRANDMOTHERS BEYOND BORDERS

NEWSLETTER

“The Second Time Around” *My Impressions of Uganda, as a GBB Team Member*

I knew I would return to the beautiful country of Uganda following my initial visit in May 2007, when I participated in a University of Wisconsin-Madison Health and Disease in Uganda field experience. However, I could not have imagined my return would be less than a year after the first visit, and that I would be going as a member of the **Grandmothers Beyond Borders** team. The people of Uganda are among the friendliest people I have ever encountered, and it comes as no surprise that this country is called “The Pearl of Africa.” This was an amazing opportunity and I am so fortunate that I was able to participate in this way.

Our days were full, productive and adventurous. Each week we made visits to the selected villages and parishes (Naggalama, Kasawo and Kimbimbiri). I thought we would meet with a handful of grandmothers and elders. To my surprise, within each village there were well over 50 elders and grandmothers, or “Jjajjas,” the Luganda word for grandmother, in attendance. Many of them walked several miles, eager to meet us and to share their story. I found them all to be extremely warm and full of life, despite the daily challenges they

face. Through our discussion groups with Jjajjas in each village, I began to see that many villages are dealing with the same issues: lack of clean water, transportation to clinics, food security, HIV/AIDS, adequate housing, etc. Most of these grandmothers are taking care of an average of 6-10 grandchildren, many of whose parents died from complications related to HIV/AIDS. I spoke with a grandmother who said her son was building a house for her but HIV/AIDS took him before he could finish. Therefore, she is still living in a collapsing house with her grandchildren. Talking to her and other Jjajjas, I could not help but think about my own Jjajjas who are both in a higher place now, but their spirit lives and moves within me.

I also enjoyed spending the day with John, an elder in the Kasawo village. He has a strong connection to his village, and sincerely cares about the people in it. One morning he took us on a village walk, and showed us the local market, his many gardens, and the local water source that is about four miles from his house!

John is now a retired educator who devoted over 25 years to teaching math and science in secondary schools in Uganda. He

mentioned that he is still waiting to receive his retirement check from the Ugandan government. John has been waiting for this check for almost five years! He said the check probably is not much money, but that it is the recognition of his service to his country that is important. Through John’s connection with the village, we were able to talk with people infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. During our village walk, we met a man who had recently lost his wife to the virus and his child is currently living with the virus. However, he said that he was HIV-negative. John mentioned that the man actually may not know his status and that denial is quite common. I did my own research on the percentage of Ugandans who have tested for HIV and found it to be only 12% of the population. I presented this statistic in the HIV/AIDS education and prevention workshops I conducted at The Seed of Wisdom School in the Kasawo village and a majority of the 700 students were unaware, yet eager to learn. I am amazed at how they soaked up knowledge and their level of self-discipline was commendable. Following the workshops, they were motivated to develop their own healthy relationship club, titled “Each One, Teach One.” Many of them understand that education is a

true form of liberalism and this understanding is definitely visible among them.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to return with **GBB** and I left far more motivated and challenged to continue my education and to teach others. I must say, each day in Uganda was an adventure and I kept falling in love with the people and the rich culture. I am truly humbled at how hard the people of Uganda work. They make the best of the few resources they have and are true survivors. One would never know the pain they are experiencing, because it is not in their culture to complain, only to keep hoping and to work hard in hope of a better life for themselves and their family.



Sabrina a 2nd-year UW-Madison Population Health Fellow, based at the City of Milwaukee Health Department in Milwaukee, WI.



“Return to Kampala” *by Janine Arseneau*

Dressed in traditional, formal multicolored Ugandan silk dresses with epaulets and contrasting sashes, the Jjajjas (elders) of four community associations footed more than five miles to get to our meeting place. Some were already there when we arrived. Others came a bit later. All of them greeted us warmly, shaking hands in the

three step palm to palm, interlocking thumb, palm to palm handshake of friendship. Making sure we were seated on chairs, they arranged themselves on the floor, on the ground, on church pews they themselves carried to be close to us on this, the third visit to Uganda of representatives from Milwaukee-based **GBB**. The Grandmothers and

Grandfathers of four villages near Kampala, Uganda, came to meet with us, to offer progress reports of changes in their lives, in their communities in the past year, to detail their needs, current and future, and to honor the travelers from the US with their presence and some of their stories. The first time GBB representatives came to Uganda to meet the Jjajjas,

they found individuals who felt abandoned, isolated, alone. Since then, with the assistance of parish-based social workers and interns, associations of elders were formed, with a formal structure, including elected leaders, regular meetings, and networks of communication and inclusion. The associations make decisions about how to



best use resources, how to accommodate the most able elders, who are capable of raising pigs or chickens, as well as those

who are too ill to look after themselves and their grandchildren

The elders spoke of their experiences at a health care center where GBB had established health care funds on their behalf. As one jjajja put it, "Before, they didn't even see us. Now they treat us like jjajjas with a purpose" (with value). A dapper sixty nine year old gentleman in beige sport coat and brown trousers took off his round glasses to wipe tears from his eyes as he told of his successful hernia repair surgery and follow up care, of how he feels well again and is able to contribute to his community and help others. Earlier in the day, this same gentleman had climbed onto the back of a pick up truck to accompany the visitors on home visits. At the conclusion of the community meeting, when jjajjas were offered rides on a bus, he declined the invitation, choosing instead to ride home on his bicycle. Other elders shared stories of improved circumstances and of the many lack-ofs...reliable sources of clean water; school tuition and lunches for the grandchildren; improved housing.

Many places, indeed perhaps most places, are filled with many contrasts, some obvious and easily recognizable, others more subtle. In Uganda the contrasts are palpable, inescapable. In a land where lush tropical plants like mangoes and papaya, bananas and pineapples flourish as abundantly as the ever present mosquitoes, monoculture depleted red earth is washed

away after rainstorms, denuding paths and opening deep crevasses in roads. A land where children's bright smiles tell a story at odds with their swollen bellies; where luxury hotels surrounded by tidy, cultivated gardens exist just on the other side of villages comprised of one-room mud huts with corroded metal roofs; where jjajjas living in those huts invite visitors inside, and offer them the best seats available on beautifully woven floor mats or on chairs placed beside small tables draped in white lace cloths; where jjajjas' grandchildren walk long distances to fill yellow jerry cans with water they pump from community wells or fish out of polluted springs. Where poverty means grandchildren who attend school stand out as the ones not wearing school uniforms, the ones who play quietly in the shade of trees in the school yard at lunchtime while other children eat the lunches provided to those who can afford to pay for food; where poverty means many children will not be able to attend school at all. Where poverty means waiting for a package sponsored by GBB to arrive, a package that contains the most basic of provisions: maize flour and cooking oil, sugar and paraffin once a month, soap every three months, and a blanket when possible. Where grandchildren sleep on earthen floors, and arrange themselves like closely nested spoons, depending on one another for warmth on cold, damp nights.

Words, even hundreds of words, do not begin to convey the contrasts – or the possibilities, the dignity, the sheer beauty of the land and the people who dwell upon the land. It is said of the soil of Uganda that anything planted in it will grow and flourish. That is not true of land that has been robbed of the very qualities that made it so fertile. Restoring the land to its original nature follows the same path as restoring individuals to wholeness...acknowledging and where possible, undoing, harms done...creating new avenues for relief and replenishment...planting seeds of hope and tending the ten-

der shoots till they're well-established

During our brief stay in Uganda, we were struck many times over by the warmth of the people we met, the capacity to not be defeated by circumstance, the desire to create a better life for the next generation, the generosity expressed in simple acts of sharing whatever they had access to, of making gifts of beadwork and mats, hats and purses. And the simple truth, that came as an observation: at the end of one of our gatherings, jjajjas seated themselves on the back of boda-bodas (motorbikes). Watching women in their 80's climb onto the bodas and hold on tight, a member of our small delegation remarked, "People on both sides of that equation are fearless." Another member added, "and trusting."

The same can be said of the people of the US and of Uganda who have formed the GBB movement and partnership. People on both sides of this equation are fearless and trusting. They have not yet moved mountains, but they have begun removing small stones.

With love and respect....



"Restoring hope among the Aged" by Florence Lumala, Project Coordinator, Grandmothers Project in Lugazi Diocese In Uganda



To many people in Uganda the aged appear as useless in society. Their social, cultural and economic roles are invisible and go unrecognised. The tireless efforts and service during their youthful times is completely forgotten. Yet they contributed a lot to make the nation to be what it is now. I wish we could always re-

member that it's the past which makes present. What is talked about is visibly seen when older people are consistently among the poorest and most marginalised.

HIV/AIDS has weakened traditional support systems leaving growing numbers of aged people to cope alone. They are left to support themselves and orphans under their care. Stressful as the situation may be they try to make ends meet; when

they look for food, pay school fees, meet medical bills, security and clothing.

*In Lugazi Diocese an outreach Grandmothers Project was started in 2006 in remembrance of their good deeds during their youthful era. With the financial assistance from **Grandmother Beyond Borders (USA)** the elders are supported within their localities where benefits have started to become realised.*

We can only continue to support Grandmothers in Uganda through your generosity. Financial donations



The elders decided to start from the known to the unknown. They keep livestock especially local chicken, pigs, cows and goats. They were trained in making improvement in managerial skills, housing and feeding in order to increase on production hence increase income. They weave baskets and mats; make beads, tie and dye. Once they were trained this has made them more economically active and created an opportunity of improving on living conditions.

The project provides free medication in a bigger missionary hospital where they go for treatment. This has improved on their health status making them more active in day today activities.

The regular meetings organised in the project area brings the elders together, share experi-

ences; discuss development issues and plan of how to conduct the project activities. They elected leaders who are responsible for running the project. This has awakened their potentials and became more useful to the society. While together they sing and dance which helps them to think otherwise and forget on the calamities at home.

Through meetings more projects to raise money for their well-being have been proposed such as planting a forest where they can raise some money to meet their domestic needs and pay school fees for their orphans; once timber is sold out. They proposed construction of a community hall which can be used for their meetings, social gatherings, health treatment, HIV/AIDS and counselling centre. It can also be an income generating project once it is hired to the public for social functions. They also proposed to join hands with their orphans to make earth bricks to improve on their housing structures sanitation and hygiene that are

in a dilapidated state. Bringing aged people together a lot of ideas may be generated; which information can be used to build a better future for the nation.

“Old Age is Wisdom”



“Bicycles” by Amy Peterson

When I see someone 50 or older riding a bike, I imagine that they are riding for fitness or leisure. They are often wearing a helmet and clothing that suits this activity. This year while in Uganda, meeting with the elders in the 4 village associations, we heard the stories of the grandmothers walking up to five miles just to identify sick and disabled elders. The regular mode of transport for many living in poverty in rural areas of Uganda is foot, or if lucky a bicycle. It is truly amazing to witness what can be carried on the top of one’s head or on the back of a bicycle.

One of the goals of the newly formed elders associations is to identify and elect leaders in each association. These leaders then set out to find grandparents living in their villages, which can mean walking for miles and miles, often barefoot and in the rain. Once identified, these grandparents attend monthly meetings, but if they are too sick or weak, they get regular visits and supplies from association volunteers who themselves often exceed the age of 60. This March, when volunteers from GBB asked the elders how we could help facilitate this effort, the answer was purchase bicycles.

Before leaving Uganda, GBB donated two bicycles for each association; making it a little easier for the grandparents to connect to one another. You can see in the photo that these elders will not have helmets or riding gear, but instead, be

armored with a sense of purpose and hope for the future.



We are growing and we need volunteers!

If you have an interest in volunteering in any of these areas, please contact

Jolie Zimmer at 414-964-6769.

- Public Relations/Marketing
- Fundraising/Fund development
- Newsletter
- Events planning



In the past year, GBB has supported projects in Four Elders Associations in Uganda. Some of the functions of the association are to:

- Provide emotional support
- Develop income generating projects
- Provide medical treatment
- Provide food stuff & other supplies
- Pay school fees for grandchildren
- Provide monthly meetings & special events



Stephanie Keys, Student Intern who spent 6 weeks in Uganda for GBB.

Grandmothers Beyond Borders

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"We Thank you and greatly appreciate your generous support".



“Reaching Out to the Elderly thru Art” by Stephen Ssenkaaba



WALK into Makerere University art gallery today and you will be somewhat surprised at what you will find there. The wall hangings, paintings and sculptures have been removed from the main exhibition hall and replaced with handicrafts —baskets, sisal bags, mats, tie-and-dye fabrics, fibre/beaded balls, dolls and simple drawings. For a gallery dedicated to promoting and showcasing conventional and contemporary art, this is unusual. But what is more interesting are the artists behind the ongoing exhibit.

A group of elderly men and women, most of them above 65 years, are taking part in what is perhaps the first ever art exhibition by the unschooled rural elderly in this country. The group comprises over 20 participants from Naggalama Catholic Parish in Lugazi Diocese, who have been mobilised by **Grandmothers Beyond Borders** (GBB), a group that

links volunteers in the US and Uganda in supporting the elderly. Working together with Naggalama Parish, GBB and Makerere University’s Margaret Trowel School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA), offered materials, skills and space that enabled the old men and women to produce the crafts. Proceeds from the sale of the crafts will be used to improve the lives of these old people. All this is part of GBB’s initiative to empower the elderly and MTSIFA’s efforts to reach out to communities using visual arts. While this exhibition does not necessarily seek to glorify the values of modern art, it takes us back to the core values of good art. In it we see a commendable effort by the artists to reach out to the public, express feelings and communicate to the ordinary man.

Looking at the mats, baskets and simple pieces of fabric in deep-blue and gold among other items, Ugandans find a strong linkage between the works on display and our culture. The well-

decorated sisal bags remind anyone of the busy market days, while the baskets connote the traditional carriers we use in our homes. In their simple, naïve styles, the old people also drew pictures depicting their perceptions of life.

Caricatures of people tilling land, families gathered together and homesteads, filled this section of the gallery. Most telling of all was a drawing of a man and woman facing their plantation and saying: “Kiki Ekituuse ku Bitooke Byaffe?”. (What happened to our plantation?). If there ever was a loud voice at the exhibition, this was it.



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