

St Nicholas Uganda Children's Fund

Newsletter

March 2006

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“Here am I and the children whom the LORD has given me.” (*Isaiah 8:18a*)

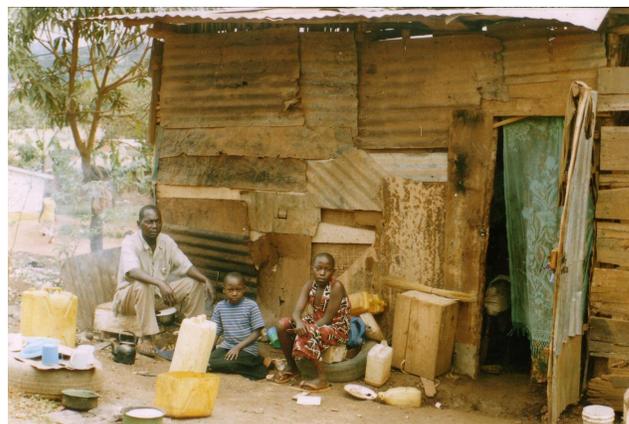
Two little girls stood across the desk from me as I sat in a tiny office at the hospital. I looked at them and then at the interview forms I was trying to complete. They had been recommended to us for school sponsorship by Sister Dorothy, a Ugandan nurse who manages a home-based HIV/AIDS program. Dorothy knew that we were not accepting new applications at this time, but she was not one to be troubled by such technicalities. Her work takes her into the impoverished neighborhoods that surround the church compound where we live, and she is not shy about bringing the neediest cases to our personal attention.

The girls' schooling had stopped abruptly over a year ago. Their mother was dead, and last year their father fell seriously ill and was too weak to work to pay school fees. I looked at the girls again. They seemed to be about average heights for the classes they were about to enter—Christine in 4th grade and Sharon in 1st. But when I asked their ages, Christine said she was fourteen and Sharon ten. Then I remembered that Dorothy had told us both girls were also HIV positive. Perhaps the latent illness had limited their growth, or perhaps it was due to lack of proper nutrition. But today they both seemed like normal, healthy kids—sweet, shy, and beautiful. I told them to report to the primary school office for class placement the following morning.

The next day as I was passing the primary school, I saw Christine sitting at the desk outside the office working on her placement exam. Sharon had already been sent to class! I hadn't expected them to start immediately, but why not? I entered the office and paid for school

fees, lunches, and uniforms. I explained the girls' situation to Sarah, the deputy headmistress, and she volunteered to inform their teachers. The teachers needed to be aware that if the girls ever appeared to be tired or listless it wasn't a behavioral problem. Now I had to get back to our apartment so we could gather their school supplies.

In the meantime, Dorothy had given my wife Sharon a photograph of the “house” that the family was living in. A kindly neighbor had allowed Japheth Kasiryee, the girls' father, to construct a shelter on his property adjacent to a small wood-working shed. Mr. Kasiryee had initially tacked up papyrus mats onto vertical boards of scrap lumber and was now trying to cover the papyrus with irregular pieces of scrap corrugated iron. I really don't know what Dorothy expected us to do, since it made no sense to build a real house on land that he didn't own. And besides, Sharon and I were planning to leave for America in two weeks for much-needed time with our family. Christine and Sharon would be attending school and eating lunch every day. Mr. Kasiryee would have to continue improving the place piece by piece with whatever strength he had.



We packed school bags with everything the girls would need to begin class. I intended to present them to Christine and Sharon on the next day of school after the local election holiday. For some reason I hadn't put away the photo, and it sat on my “to do” pile nagging at my conscience. On Election Day, I saw the school bags ready to go and decided to visit the house myself.

Charity at arm's length is an easy and safe exercise. We place a needy child in school, pay her fees, buy her lunches, and put her in a nice, clean uniform. She is appropriately grateful, and

we can take some satisfaction when we walk by the school and see her running and playing with the other kids. It becomes even more satisfying when she spots us passing by and comes running over with some of our other children just to greet us, their benefactors. In the evening, we return to our cozy apartment and they return to wherever it is they live.

The exercise becomes dangerous when we determine to actually go and see what it is they are returning to every evening. Although I've not personally visited all of the homes our children come from, I've seen enough to know that I'm taking a risk—not risk of physical violence, but an emotional risk. Often the homes are decent by urban African standards—one or two rooms in a mud-brick structure kept in some semblance of order by a caring mom, step-mom, auntie or grandma. Sure, there may be six or more children sleeping there, but that's not unusual. They are used to it.

However, living conditions in our urban slum are not always so tidy. Many of you remember Sharon's initial encounter with the collapsing mud hut between the road and the swamp, where *JjaJja* stayed with her eight (or more?) grandchildren. I had taken the risk with Thomas, one of our high school boys, visiting the single borrowed room he shared with his own *JjaJja*, and his younger brother and sister. Kampala is a city of hills and valleys, and Thomas's family lived in one of the lowest-lying areas. "What happens during rainy season?" I foolishly asked. Thomas answered, "The water rises and everything gets wet." (Thomas is now a boarding student.)

So I knew what I was getting into when I walked down to the hospital to ask Dorothy for directions to the girls' home. "I'll take you there," she said, grabbing one of the packed school bags. We walked about two kilometers until we came to the house in the photograph. I greeted Mr. Kasirye in *luganda* according to the custom of his tribe. He answered, "We are somehow OK," and went off to gather the girls from their play.

Dorothy showed me the inside of the cluttered 8'x12' space. There was a solitary twin mattress on the floor, and a chair where the father probably slept. The rusty, iron-sheeted roof was spotted with small holes, and the patchwork south wall did not reach to the roof level,

allowing rain to pour in if the wind was blowing from that direction. We exited the dark, cramped space and I noticed that food was being prepared over charcoal. Dad was trying his level best to care for these kids.

Christine and Sharon appeared with a smaller brother, and greeted me as if they'd known me forever. They were thrilled to receive the school bags but didn't know that there was stuff inside. Dorothy told them to open them. Words cannot express my feelings as I watched the girls take each item out of the bag and examine them one by one. Their faces glowed with joy and disbelief as they each pulled out a plastic lunch plate and mug, pens, pencils, exercise books, and two pairs of regulation school socks. While the girls were marveling over this unexpected bounty, I began to question Mr. Kasirye about his renovation plans. He earns money for food by buying and selling scrap iron pieces, keeping what he can to patch the house. Since his typical transactions are in the 5-10¢ range, new iron sheets at around \$7 each are out of the question. By this time, of course, my emotions were shot, so I emptied my pockets. It wasn't enough money to completely cover the entire shack with new sheets, but it was enough for him to replace the leaky roof and reuse the old roof pieces to extend the south wall all the way up. At least they won't have to fear the rain.

I know I'll be back to visit that house, ostensibly to check up on the work, but who am I kidding? This is the risk we take—that we become involved with people at the basic level of their very lives. Yes, it is rewarding, but also heart-breaking, frustrating, and uncertain. How long will he remain healthy? How long will the girls remain healthy? Will they find enough to eat? Are we able to trust that God loves them even more than we do?

For now, it's enough that when I pass by the school, Christine and Sharon come running up to greet me, along with the other children the LORD has given me.

We welcome your donations.

Checks may be sent to:

St. Nicholas Uganda Children's Fund
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Chardon, OH 44024-0285