

St. Nicholas Uganda Children's Fund Newsletter

June 2011

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"For the needy shall not always
be forgotten, nor the hope of
the poor perish forever."

—Psalm 9:18



The JjaJja Who Never Gives Up

JjaJja Maria is 69 years old. She was born with kyphosis (hump back). Despite her infirmity, she married and produced seven children who in turn produced many grandchildren. Her husband and all but one of her children are dead. JjaJja herself was hit by a car ten years ago and now walks with the aid of a crude wooden crutch. An ancient donated fold-up wheelchair hangs on a wall in her house. She refuses to use it. "If I use that," she says, "I'll forget how to walk."

"JjaJja," in the Luganda language, can mean grandparent, older relative, or ancestor. In traditional Kiganda culture, the elderly were entitled to rest in front of the hut, sharing wisdom and being cared for by their adult children. But in today's Uganda, a large proportion of that middle generation of adults has been wiped out—mostly by disease, but also by violent crime and accidents. Now Uganda's grandparents are caring for their children's children.

It was her determination that impressed us when we first met more than four years ago. She arrived at our door with three grandchildren she was caring for at the time. She had hobbled uphill on her crutch for more than a mile with the children in tow to request help with school fees. Deborah and Lilian had lost their father to Lake Victoria and Frank's father died in an auto accident. Their mother found yet another man and abandoned the children to JjaJja. She sent JjaJja

small amounts of money for a while, until she produced children with her new man. Deborah was in our program for a year; then relatives came and took her away. Frank, a continual discipline problem for three years, refused to reform despite counseling from us and threats from the school. Even JjaJja was unable to control him and he was sent to stay with other relatives in a remote village. Lilian is still with us and is now in Primary 7. Next year she'll be attending St. Antonios Secondary School as a boarding student.



Lilian

Some years back, JjaJja inherited a small parcel of land from her aunt. She and seven grandchildren stay in a crumbling, unplastered two-room house built by one of her late sons. She has two additional rooms she rents out to relatives, each for about six dollars a month. The government recently opened a four-lane outer belt highway that passes within 25 yards of the property. Not to be deterred, JjaJja planted vegetables between her house and the roadbed.



JjaJja's garden

Four years ago, JjaJja worked at a nearby trading center cooking and selling food. She started that business after she failed at raising pigs (they all died). Now she is no longer able to work on a regular basis and survives on the tenants' rent, what she grows by the highway, and some food that her lone surviving son gives her. Two of the children in her house are his—sent to JjaJja's because his current wife doesn't want them around. At least he cares enough to pay their school fees.

The most recent addition to her household is seven-year-old Kelly. He is a step-grandson, not even a blood relative, but that is not a consideration for JjaJja. Kelly's father died of AIDS, and his mother works as a housegirl on the other side of Kampala. When JjaJja learned that he wasn't in school, she brought him into her home and then to our office.



Kelly with book bag and new school uniform

In March, we visited JjaJja's humble home to see how she was getting along. She welcomed us with joy, invited us in, and insisted that we sit on her only chairs while she sat on the floor. Traffic roared by on the highway, adding a constant drone of background noise to our conversation. We talked about the weather and her health, and listened to her stories. She apologized for having nothing to offer us to drink, but she was clearly delighted by our visit.



Never one to miss an opportunity, she made an appeal for her exiled grandson Frank. "He is miserable in the village. He's learned his lesson. The village school is terrible. There is little food . . . and he has chiggers!" How can we say no to JjaJja? If she is willing to take him back and shoehorn him in with the other seven children, we've got to give him another chance.

It is a common misconception that poverty is linked to dependence. In fact, the poor bear much more responsibility for their lives than the rich. The rich can indulge any whim without fear of financial disaster. JjaJja has to consider every cup of watery tea.

Whatever misfortunes she has suffered, through all that she has endured and is struggling to overcome, she has never lost hope. Your support and your prayers are sustaining that hope for JjaJja and the children. Thank you on their behalf!

Peter & Sharon

We welcome your donations.
Checks may be sent to:

St. Nicholas Uganda Children's Fund
P.O. Box 285
Chardon, OH 44024-0285

Or you can donate online at
www.ugandachildrensfund.org

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