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# African AIDS: Hope and Help Defeat Despair

BY GUS NASMITH

**U**nder the threat of a future avian flu pandemic, might our "leaders" finally get it that we all breathe the same air, that planetary sicknesses affect us all?

Or will combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic – a reality, not a hypothetical, for more than twenty years – be further sidelined? Post-9/11, those who haven't blinked – UNAIDS; the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; UN Agencies; non-governmental organizations; and courageously those at the grassroots – struggle on valiantly.

In the poverty-stricken developing world, stigma, fear and denial fuel the pandemic's expanding swath: 40 MILLION infected, well more than 3 million deaths last year, 15 million children "AIDS orphans."

Twenty-six MILLION of those with HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2003 I joined 900 others at the International Conference of the Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Kampala, Uganda. Inspirational HIV+ women courageously stand up to fight to live and to save their children. When we know death and share grief, we share a most profound experience of living and capacity to share. Why is this more apparent among the poor and suffering than the rich and powerful? Grassroots activism and international support prod governments and bring hope.

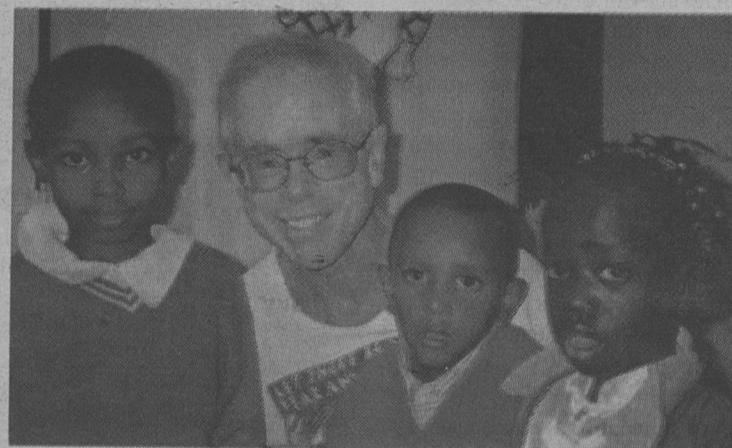
Returning to Kampala at the beginning of 2005, I reunited with Milly, Lydia, Irene, Sam, David and Dorothy and their children and other dear Ugandans. What a joy to bring them together with my friends, newly resident in Kampala, Charles Steinberg (MD) and Torkin Wakefield, founders and leaders from 1987 of the empowering American experience, "AIDS, Medicine & Miracles." AM&M opened so many doors to my own living with AIDS. Treasured by the African nurses and doctors he trains, "Dr. Charles's" respectful loving connection with his patients and staff is a key component of his effective HIV care.

Some months before my visit, Torkin had found a desolate shanty-town of Acholi refugees from Uganda's war-torn north in a sun-baked rock quarry on the outskirts of Kampala. For a pittance, the Acholi, mainly women, pounded

rocks by hand in incredible heat, their adjacent homes mere shacks without water or electricity. Torkin's serendipitous encounter with a woman making beautiful beads from discarded magazines spearheaded "Beadforlife." Now 160 beaders support their families, more than tripling their incomes from the quarry. Visit [www.beadforlife.com](http://www.beadforlife.com) for an enriching exposure to the principles, organization, and the beauty of the people as incandescent as their beads. The energy, spirit and family dedication of Ugandan

14-year-old orphan brought in Daniel, his listless 10-year-old brother (who looked 5). Daniel was ill with tuberculosis and found to be HIV infected. In Kenya, those needing help are helping others: Christine, the Kayole program coordinator, mother of two and HIV+ herself, took in Daniel. Through her nurturing and the medical care she could access, Daniel greatly improved, going from 33 to 48 pounds in a couple months. The boy who hardly spoke his name now insists upon attending his new school, even when he would be allowed to rest at home. Another HIV+ Vermonter and I sponsor Daniel's schooling and non-medical needs for about \$40 a month.

WOFAK proudly had me meet 19-year-old Linzy. Her father died of AIDS some years



Gus Nasmith with Daniel and "dear girls" at the Kayole WOFAK Center in February 2005.

women have been linked to North Americans who believe in creating "a world that works for all." Read how in addition to fair wages, Beadforlife profits provide scholarships, training programs and other community development projects for a sustainable future.

From Uganda I traveled to neighboring Kenya. The populous poor Kayole district far from Nairobi's center bustles as a city of its own. The modest Kayole outreach center of Women Fighting AIDS in Kenya ([www.wofak.or.ke](http://www.wofak.or.ke)) is a vital lifeline to those in most need. Vivid memories of my three days with WOFAK include the packed community support group, energizing even those almost too ill to sit; the children quietly assembling for the lunch of porridge and vegetable, their one meal of the day; the kindness and cooperation of the medical doctor and the traditional healer, whose small offices were side by side; the visits to neighborhood apprentice trade programs for grateful older orphans; the respectful classes taught by young HIV+ teachers in an orphanage where the children took care of the building and each other; the home care visits to ill women whose ten-square-foot family living space lacked water, electricity or toilet facilities.

One morning an exhausted

ago. Since then she has been a key help to her mother (living with AIDS) as they take a variety of menial jobs to provide food for 8 children and rent for their one-room home. With WOFAK's help, and against all odds, Linzy finished secondary school and gained university admission. My family and friends have joined to enable her to enroll for a community development degree at Kenyatta University. The fees, board and other living costs total less than \$1,000 per year.

Caused by a virus, AIDS wreaks a devastation that reflects the failures of governments, human institutions, prejudices and fears that damage us all. We must continue to try to correct the killing injustices, however daunting the history and the tasks seem. We can take specific personal actions that enrich our own experience. What awful realities the friends in Africa face. Even so, they radiate in their hopes for life. "Where we are broken is where the light comes shining through." ▼

For information on how to assist WOFAK programs or individual sponsorships contact Gus at [gna-smith@sover.net](mailto:gna-smith@sover.net). Augustus "Gus" Nasmith, Jr. represented several organizations at the XV International AIDS conference in Bangkok, Thailand, July 2004. He lives in Rutland.



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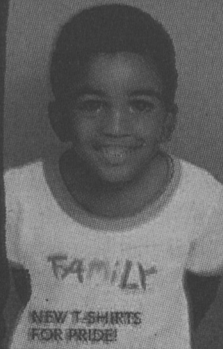


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