



Newsletter
September 2009

SYLVIA'S CHILDREN



Sylvia's Children update ... September 2, 2009

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This will be a quick update since it has been two months since I've last communicated! First, you are getting list of the trips; Second, a report on this summer's trip written by Jeannie MacDonald who was on the trip. Read and enjoy!

Trip #1 ... November 26-December 3 ... This is the Christmas party trip where we give the children gifts and just enjoy the school. Our church did Christmas in July and so far we have \$750 towards Christmas (need \$5,000 to cover gifts and party). Currently three are signed up to go on the trip... if we get six the cost will only be \$2,000 per person from Newark (that includes air-fare and everything), four it will be \$2,250. Need to know by October 10 (sooner if this will be your first trip because you need to get shots.)

Trip #2 ... March 11-24, 2010 ... This trip will be four days at the school and one day in the village of Tekerah to see how they do a clinic there. During the time at the school (and clinic if Brigitte wants) I would like us to examine as many children as possible. At our school, we can use the large assembly hall and almost do a round robin. (However, that I would leave up to all of you ... I am not the medical expert.) At the end of the trip we will take a short jaunt to Mweya Lodge and take a morning safari ride; afternoon boat ride to see hippos, elephants taking a bath, water buffalo and tons of beautiful bird life; and relax. Monday, the 23rd we will then go back to Kampala and fly out that night, getting into Newark around noon on the 24th. That trip is \$3,500 from Newark and, as with all the others, totally inclusive. The only money you will need will be for souvenirs and tip to our guide. We need to raise \$45,000 for the clinic which would include both a front and back reception area (front for the village and back for the school), two examining rooms, equipment, bathroom facilities, nurse and doctor for a year, and supplies. If we get them started, within a year they can be self-sustaining and have a profit margin.

Trip #3 ... June 17-30, 2010 ... This trip is also \$3,500 and includes, again, a trip to Tekerah, attending Geoffrey's father's church and being at the school with a short safari at the end. During the time at the school we need to update the orphan inventory to get current pictures, update their ages, what class they are in, etc. Would love to re-visit Mahinga lodge; however, their rooms are not singles and other than being the most wonderfully relaxing place on earth with a view of the African Savannah, there isn't much to do. However, it is in that gift shop I bought a card with a Ugandan phrase: NEVER RUB BOTTOMS WITH A PORCUPINE. They have basic wisdom!

Our goal for all of this is to have the school be independent of us ... a clinic that would generate revenue, a sewing business, a chicken farm, corn growing and milling, arts and crafts ... all of which would generate revenue, create personal pride for them, allow some of the children to learn a vocation and remove them from dependence on us.

Sylvia's Children: Summer Trip to Mbirizi, Uganda

Sylvia Allen's sixth trip to the Mbirizi Advanced Primary School in Mbirizi, Uganda was a rewarding and unforgettable experience for the 13 travelers who accompanied Sylvia this past June. The group consisted of three teachers, two nurse practitioners, one nurse, a pastor-in-training, a performing artist, several business people including Sylvia's two children, and Sylvia who is the inspiration behind all of the trips and this story. The members of this group came from Washington State, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and the Netherlands. Their common link was the desire to help the 1,002 students at the school that Sylvia has been supporting through donations to her 501(c)3 nonprofit charity. She created the charity single-handedly in 2003 and named it Sylvia's Children.

As the bus pulled into the Mbirizi Advanced Primary and Day Care School the last Monday in June, more than one thousand students and teachers were lining both sides of the school entrance road to sing songs of welcome. They saw the big safari bus before they saw the visitors. A waving sea of hands greeted us as we got off the bus and passed through the middle of the lines. The children and staff were clearly excited about the visit of Grand Sylvia, as everyone at the school calls their adopted grandmother, Sylvia. The visitors were amazed by the warmth, big smiles, embraces, handshakes, traditional dancing, and singing --including songs written especially for Grand Sylvia-- in this initial welcome and throughout the week. The Ugandan people express their joy and appreciation so openly.

Sylvia had told the visitors what the reaction from the children and staff would be to our visit; to experience it was overwhelmingly wonderful. Now for some background information to better help understand the trip.

Each time that Sylvia visits, she brings something for the children that she feels they need. In past years she brought each child a blanket- their request for a Christmas present- and a new shirt. She decided that the birthday gift to the 1,002 children currently enrolled would be a pair of new "CROCS" and new socks. Why crocs that many think are not very comfortable and not very attractive? Sylvia realized from her many visits that crocs are perfect footwear for the alternating dry and dusty to wet and muddy conditions typical of Uganda's changing seasons.

Once Sylvia decided on the footwear she had to find a way of obtaining and shipping 1,000+ crocs. She and a teacher at Holmdel Village School met with Principal Liz Giacobbe and the plan for a shoe drive came into being. The shoe drive was a school-wide service-learning project overseen by Principal Liz Giacobbe and Assistant Principal Dionne Ledford. They wove the shoe drive project into the theme of the school's 2008-2009 character education program *If the Shoe Fits Wear It* and tied it to the character trait of May, fairness. Sylvia did two presentations at Holmdel Village School to share her vision through a slide presentation and display of artifacts. She explained to the students and staff why the project was so important, to her and to the students at the school she supports.

Finding one thousand pairs of crocs in the right sizes turned out to be a challenge, much more difficult than expected. Holmdel Village School students and staff rallied behind the enormous undertaking and generously donated the majority of the crocs, over 800 pairs. Holmdel Community Church members and Crocs, Inc. stepped in to supply the croc sizes that were still needed after the Holmdel Village School Shoe Drive ended the first week in June. The students and families from Home Away From Home Academy had a sock drive earlier in the school year and collected 600 pairs of socks and Sylvia made up the difference from donations to Sylvia's Children. Many local businesses also helped in the effort to get crocs. Jen, the store manager of Michael's in Holmdel personally transferred boxes of crocs from other Michael's stores around New Jersey when it became clear that supplies were running out locally. A Middletown Studio 35 hairdresser, the Children's Place in Holmdel, and Cost Cutters throughout Monmouth County also were part of the effort. In the end there were enough crocs and socks collected to ensure that all 1,002 students would get a birthday gift. (Birthdays are celebrated in July for all of the students to make it less painful that many orphans don't know how old they are or when they were born.) There were even a few large sizes left for very appreciative teachers.

The crocs and socks were sorted on two Sunday afternoons in mid June at Sylvia's Holmdel home and then packed as tightly as possible into army duffel bags. Each of the 13 travelers was allotted one suitcase for personal belongings and one duffel bag. Sylvia needed travelers not only to help at the school but also to get supplies there. Eight duffel bags had to be checked as extra baggage at a cost of 150 dollars per bag. The Holmdel Foundation for Education Excellence generously helped with the extra shipping charges as well as the Holmdel Community United Church of Christ. It would have been prohibitive for Sylvia to foot the bill for this project. The cost of the socks and crocs would have easily exceeded five thousand dollars and the shipping expenses for 21 duffel bags without her group would have been over three thousand dollars. The project was truly a community effort; thanks and appreciation need to be extended to hundreds of people who got involved. Let's now return to the June trip to Uganda.

The trip was a very full, two-week, whirlwind of activity; Sylvia has the routine down. It takes the better part of two days just to get to the area of Uganda where the school is located- two eight-hour plane rides and a two-hour bus ride out of the capital city of Kampala. So four days were spent in travel. The group stayed in the closest large town to where the school is, Masaka, where there are a few hotels that can accommodate a group of 13 people. It's then another 45-minute drive from Masaka to Mbirizi on a two-lane 'highway,' which might qualify as a secondary road in the U.S. The group did this trip twelve times during the course of the stay.

On the first day at Mbirizi School, after the overwhelming welcome, Sylvia and the group spent close to three hours passing out the crocs and socks to almost all of the preschool through middle school students. The students who were absent got theirs when they returned to school; there were a dozen or so who were not there on our first day. The students loved their new shoes and socks; most had never had new shoes, especially shoes that fit. Some kneeled or bowed to show their gratitude, some just beamed. There was no fussing over color or style, just appreciation. Almost every student said, "Thank you."

On the second two days many group members helped Sylvia in the annual orphan inventory. There are currently 240 orphans who live in two dormitories built with funds from Sylvia's Children and the number continues to rise due to the Aids Pandemic. Sylvia keeps accurate records to ensure that each orphan at the school is accounted for and has only one sponsor. She also needs their updated personal history. As stated earlier, many orphans don't know their birthdates or how old they are making their current grade placement an important detail. However, students at the school are placed in grades based upon their achievement and not their age; size and height are not accurate indicators of grade. One class could have an age span of several years. The orphans often lag behind their similarly aged peers for reasons that are probably obvious to the reader.

On Wednesday, the visiting teachers in the group were given the opportunity to teach a lesson to the students in Primary One, Primary Two, and Primary Seven. Teaching is different with 55-60 children packed four to five on a bench in small cement-wall classrooms; however, the Ugandan students were attentive and motivated and the Ugandan teachers were receptive and appreciative. It was a wonderful experience for everyone involved and an eye-opener for the visiting teachers. Teachers at Mbirizi sharpen pencils with razor blades that children bring from home at the beginning of the school year. Scissors, markers, crayons, textbooks, books for the children to read, teaching materials, learning toys, electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing are conspicuously absent. Sylvia is working on these things, but first classrooms had to be built. The good news is that parents are sending their children to school and not keeping them home to work for them, especially to do the job of fetching the day's water. It was obvious to the visiting teachers that the Mbirizi students are bright, capable, and eager to learn. The Mbirizi teachers are bright and capable as well and they are determined to give their students a future with better choices. The students' parents know that there is little they can do to change the course of their lives. Their hope and dreams lie in education for their children, a gift that Sylvia is providing by the addition of classroom buildings, the library, and school supplies not to mention the new kitchen, clinic, and borehole that keeps the children fed, healthy, and hydrated so that they can learn. She is now working to purchase more teaching resources and more student books for the new library.

The three medical professionals in the group had work all day and every day. With 1,002 students and dozens of staff members there is always someone needing medical attention. The school nurse, recently hired by Sylvia to work in the new school clinic, was happy to have extra hands and expertise, especially when a ten-year old student named Ibrahim arrived at the clinic on Wednesday. He had become severely burned the previous evening when he tripped carrying a pot of boiling water for his family. His parents brought him to a medical clinic in the town of Mbirizi and that clinic nurse wrapped his arms in gauze; without better medical supplies, that was all that could be done for him. Ibrahim walked his usual four-mile route to school on Wednesday morning and his first period teacher immediately sent him to the school clinic. The nurses worked together to remove the gauze that had adhered to his oozing wounds, scraped off the burned flesh, applied antibiotic cream that was brought over on this trip, and re-bandaged him. They had no painkiller medication to make the procedure bearable. Yet, when they asked Ibrahim if he was hurting, his reply was, "Yes, thank you." He suffered from second and third degree burns. He never cried. The nurses knew that his chance of dying from infection was high and that if he lived he would have disfigured arms without a doctor's help. Ibrahim's parents were notified. He was put on the group's bus and, along with the nurses and his father, was taken to the closest emergency room 45 minutes away in Masaka. The charge for his emergency room treatment was less than ten dollars but more money than his parents could afford. Sylvia's Children paid for the bill. The August monthly report to Sylvia shares good news; Ibrahim is doing well.

Most people in Mbirizi have never ridden in a car or bus. Few own any kind of transportation other than a bicycle. The school does not have any vehicles to transport children or staff anywhere. Taxis are motorbikes and most people cannot afford them. The school needs a way to transport students and staff who need emergency medical care but there are other needs to be tackled first. Sylvia is working to get the school clinic more medical equipment and supplies to make the clinic more effective. She is grateful to a New Jersey doctor who recently made an extremely generous donation of two thousand dollar's worth of medical supplies to the Mbirizi School Clinic. The supplies were brought over on the June trip and were being used the first day. Sylvia hopes that other doctors who are in a position to donate supplies will follow this New Jersey doctor's lead.

On Thursday, the school staff set up a cultural exhibit of many of the jobs and crafts that are part of the life of the school. The nurse demonstrated the making of medicinal tea using commonly found plants and herbs. A kitchen worker showed how millet is ground into flour to be used to make porridge and flatbreads. A teacher showed how coffee beans are ground or packaged as beans in banana leaf cases.

Another teacher demonstrated sewing school uniforms on an old treadle sewing machine that does not need electricity. A group of teachers and students were weaving bags and placemats and making brooms with grasses they had collected. There was a display of beaded jewelry and decorations that the students and staff make to give to Sylvia to sell in shops in Uganda and here in the U.S. The earnings are helping the school on the road to self-sufficiency. Several orphans demonstrated how they wash their clothing; it is a daily task to wash their one uniform and hang it to dry for the next day. The orphans are also responsible for washing towels, bedding, and any other clothing they own each Saturday.

Over the course of the week, the visitors saw all of the school facilities, both to see the wonderful progress that has been made in six years and also to learn about the needs that remain. The visitors toured the orphan dormitories where children sleep in bunk beds two and sometimes three to a bed and are happy to have a bed. We saw the borehole from which water for the school is manually pumped, the partially completed shell of the new teacher housing (a story for later), the new building which houses the library and the clinic, the bathrooms, the open-air auditorium and classrooms, and the new kitchen. The teachers and administrators, with Sylvia in the lead, also provided the visitors with a walking tour of Mbirizi, an eye opener for those visitors who had not seen the conditions of villages in third world countries. The Ugandan people are doing the best they can without safety nets that people in the United States are accustomed to and expect. It is hard to see and even harder to understand the living conditions of the people in Mbirizi.

On the last day of the visit, there was a wonderful birthday celebration at the school. Every student gets a birthday present during Sylvia's June/July visit; each was treated to a big bowl of rice and beans and the long anticipated, semi-annual treat of a bottle of soft drink and everyone wore their new crocs! The visitors served the meal to all of the students, starting with the Baby Class and ending with Primary Seven. Rice was scooped out from under the banana leaves that serve as lids for the huge kettles. Beans were poured on top from different kettles, equally huge. The serving took almost two hours to complete. As meals were finished, children washed their dishes in basins of water on the grass so that the next group could eat. That required many water trips to the borehole. The kitchen staff then served the same meal of rice and beans to the school staff, visiting parents, and Sylvia and the group. Everyone ate in the traditional Ugandan way, with his or her fingers.

There were two wonderful programs put on by the students on the last day. A morning presentation involved all of the students at the school from Baby Class through Primary Seven. It was created and directed by Jeroen Moerik, a performing artist from the Netherlands, and some group members and had been practiced in segments throughout the week. An afternoon presentation in the auditorium included many classes singing and dancing. Sylvia's son and a group of student guitarists sang and played the song the students wrote and set to music during the week. The Mbirizi teachers, Sylvia, and the visitors were also on stage dancing to African music, with the children in their new colorful crocs. The Headmaster and administrators of the school gave short speeches to share some of the highlights of Sylvia's sixth visit with the visiting parents. They thanked Sylvia and the group for caring enough to travel to Uganda to help them and presented personalized gifts that they had made for each visitor, including an African tunic for the men and dresses for the women. Sylvia explained how each of the students got crocs and socks. The Headmaster gave each new visitor a Ugandan tribal name, a tradition reserved until the program on the last day of each visit. The students sang songs that included lyrics of thanks to Grand Sylvia for her love and her help. The program concluded with more than a thousand people in the auditorium holding hands and singing *The Friendship Song*. It was an emotional farewell as the bus pulled out of the Mbirizi Advanced Primary and Day Care School the last time for this trip. The students and staff lined the school entrance road singing and waving, just as they had when the group first arrived.

There was more to the two-week trip that could be a sequel to this story. The two-week stay also included two planned weekend activities: a trip to the Equator, a drum factory, and Tekera School Cooperative during the first weekend and to Murchison Falls National Park on the Victoria Nile for a safari the second weekend. Each activity was wonderful. But the true highlight of the trip was working at the Mbirizi School. It was an enriching experience for the Ugandans, Sylvia, and this year's group. It was a special time that will remain forever in the hearts and

minds of those of us who went. It was a unique cultural experience learning about and becoming friends with the people in Mbirizi, Uganda.

The new teacher dormitory that was mentioned earlier in this story was started last spring. It remains a brick shell one third done, built with money from Sylvia's 501(c)3 that Sylvia had been promised would be reimbursed in three payments over three years. She was informed less than a week before the trip that the funding had been withdrawn. This was a major disappointment. Teacher housing is a security measure, not a luxury, for the 240 orphans who live full time at the school. Without it there will continue to be no adults present before and after school hours, including the vulnerable night hours. Sylvia and the Mbirizi teachers remain hopeful that the teacher housing will receive the donations needed to complete it.

As this story winds to an end, there are a few details to share about the village of Mbirizi and the school that did not yet make it into this story. Although an electric power line runs through the country, few Ugandans are connected to it. Sylvia has provided one line into the school's main office for the one computer at the school. That is it for Mbirizi. Almost all of the electricity that flows through the power lines is sold to countries south of Uganda to people who can pay for it. In Mbirizi, there is no electricity, no indoor or outdoor plumbing, and no running water. Kitchens are small wood burning stoves used outside the small one or two room dwellings in which people live. The school borehole now provides clean water to the school; water must still be pumped manually and carried in special water containers to wherever it is needed—to the kitchen for cooking, to the new school clinic for medical needs, and to various locations around the school grounds for washing hands and drinking. But it is clean water. The children and staff understand how fortunate they are that Sylvia provided the funding for the borehole. Most of the people in Mbirizi, as is true all over Uganda, spend hours each day lugging water from the closest water hole and boiling it to make it safe for consumption. The visitors saw children as young as four years old walking along the roads in search of water. They fill their containers and walk long distances holding the containers or carrying them on their heads; adults sometimes strap three or four containers to their bicycles and then push the bicycles. It is no wonder that one of the songs written by the staff and sung by the children for Sylvia includes a line, "We are so happy. Thank you for the water."

There are 54 countries on the continent of Africa and each is unique. Uganda is one of the sub Saharan countries that comprise Eastern Africa. It is about the size of Oregon has the distinction of being one African country that has the equator cross it. Enormous Lake Victoria is in the southeastern part of the country and its water is the boundary between Uganda and two of its neighbors, Kenya and Tanzania. With such a body of fresh water it is hard to comprehend why there is still no infrastructure to get the water to the people who need it. There are snowcapped mountains in the southwestern part of the country, the Victoria Nile runs through tropical and savanna land in the north, and throughout the center of the country are beautiful rolling hills. Wildlife abounds and natural resources such as minerals and oil are plentiful. Yet, except for small sections of the capital city, Kampala, the standard of living in Uganda is much like it was in much of the rural United States in the 1800s. The initial shock of such living conditions gave way, over the course of the stay, to a realization that the Ugandan people have little materially yet lead remarkably happy lives. They work hard, live close to the earth, have strong family and community connections, and are understandably proud of their country and culture.

Monetary assistance to Uganda that goes toward education, wells for clean water, clinics for health care, and better infrastructure will be money well spent for millions of people. Sylvia Allen is making an enormous difference in the lives of the Mbirizi students and their families. She continues to work toward the goal she has set of making this school self-supporting by 2012. Then she wants to move on and begin again. Sylvia's June trip to Uganda was an amazing cultural connection. The people of Mbirizi and the visitors from abroad share a common belief. One person with passion and conviction *can* bring about amazing positive change to people in need around the world. Thank you for your work in Uganda, Grand Sylvia. You are an inspiration to everyone who is fortunate enough to be involved with you and your work.

Jeannie MacDonald, "Nakandi", First Grade Teacher at Holmdel Village School



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