

Building Upendo Village: A Global Effort

Wheaton Franciscans and Kenyan Sisters Provide Support for HIV/AIDS Patients

Kenya, often referred to as the “jewel of East Africa,” is known for its magnificent wildlife and awe-inspiring scenery. Tourists flock to the country to swim amongst its coral reefs, run along its white sand beaches, and explore its national parks and reserves. Often tourists are so captivated by Kenya’s sparkle that they do not see its flaw—the scourge of HIV/AIDS, which affects approximately 2.2 million Kenyans.



BY SR. BEATRICE HERNANDEZ, OSF, MD; SR. SHEILA KINSEY, OSF, DMin; & TERRI ROCOLE

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Unlike those who only visit their land, Kenyans cannot ignore the reality of HIV/AIDS, which has orphaned 1.5 million children. Drought, poverty, and malnutrition have exacerbated the situation, and a lack of understanding has led to an AIDS stigma, which in turn has led to isolation, hopelessness, and fear.

Fortunately, Sr. Florence Muia, an Assumption Sister of Nairobi (ASN) and a native Kenyan, has refused to sit back while HIV/AIDS plagues her country. She hopes, with the help of the Wheaton Franciscan community in Wheaton, IL, to bring some of the sparkle of Kenya back to its people.

MAINTAINING YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

In 1999, after nearly 15 years of the AIDS epidemic in the country, Kenyan leaders acknowledged the disease as a national disaster. Sr. Florence, who was at the time pursuing a master’s degree in pastoral studies at Loyola University Chicago, knew then that she had to do something to help her country.

As she reflected on the crisis in Kenya, Sr. Florence couldn’t help but think about a passage from the Scriptures. Leviticus 25:35 states: “If your brother or sister becomes poor and cannot maintain himself/herself . . . you shall maintain him/her.” Sr. Florence realized that she needed to establish a Kenyan project by and for the Kenyan people. Her vision was for a safe haven for women and children affected by the disease. She wanted to call this sanctuary “Upendo Village.” *Upendo* means love in her native language of Kiswahili; with the word *vil-lage*, Sr. Florence signified a global response to the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

In 2000, she shared her dream with Sr. Marge Zulaski, OSF, a Wheaton Franciscan sister who had learned about the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa through her work as a psychologist with HIV/AIDS patients in Chicago. Sr. Marge helped Sr. Florence to better define her Upendo Village dream and introduced her to the Wheaton

SUMMARY

What began as a conversation in 2000 between two women religious on how to help Kenyans affected by HIV/AIDS has evolved into a far-reaching ministry supported by the Wheaton Franciscan sisters.

Inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan, Sr. Florence Muia, ASN, a native of Kenya, explored with Sr. Marge Zulaski, OSF, a Wheaton Franciscan sister, how to offer assistance and support to Kenyans with HIV/AIDS. The two began by establishing a partnership involving the Wheaton, IL, congregation; the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi; and community members in Kenya. These partners have worked together closely to secure local community members' buy-in for a care program, study models for success, build a program infrastructure, secure funds, staff up, and interact with government agencies.

The result? Upendo Village, a program that helps ensure the physical, economic, and emotional safety of people suffering from HIV/AIDS. This partnership has enabled the Wheaton Franciscans, the Assumption Sisters, and the Kenyan community to live out a simple principle: **We are called to help each other.**

Franciscan community leadership, which had been involved with HIV/AIDS ministries for more than 11 years.

As the Good Samaritan of the parable came to understand that the "foreign" robbery victim was his neighbor, the Wheaton Franciscans realized that Sr. Florence and her Kenyan brothers and sisters were their neighbors. Although they did not share the same land or language, the Wheaton Franciscans recognized that in global solidarity with the Kenyan people they could offer assistance and support to their community. Sr. Shelia Kinsey, OSF, coordinator of the Wheaton Franciscans's Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, also advised Sr. Florence on ways to turn the Upendo Village idea into a reality.

CREATING A VIABLE PARTNERSHIP

In June 2001, the Wheaton Franciscans contracted with Sr. Florence to spend two years leading the development of Upendo Village as a means of addressing the Kenyan AIDS crisis. The Wheaton Franciscans were confident that Sr. Florence could develop a successful program because, as a native Kenyan, she was close to the situation and had in-depth knowledge of the issue. The Wheaton Franciscans's role in the development of the project was to empower Sr. Florence and provide her with the necessary resources to address the needs of the Kenyan community.

As Sr. Florence envisioned it, Upendo Village would be a safe haven for Kenyan women and children. It would be a community of love that builds bridges of hope and healing for people affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Sr. Florence felt it was extremely important to establish a broad foundation of resources for Upendo Village. In her experience, missionary activities are unsuccessful when an established ministry is handed over to the Kenyan people without taking into consideration the costs of running those activities and the time it takes for communities to develop sufficient resources to manage them. In such cases, the costs are handed over to

the clients with the services. Because they have not been paying for the services they receive, the clients are shocked by the costs. As a result of such handovers, missionaries are unfairly perceived as commercializing and profiting from the services. To avoid this with Upendo Village, Sr. Florence knew she had to develop diverse sources of funds.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

American culture lent pragmatism and business sense to the partnership between Sr. Florence and the Wheaton Franciscans. In planning Upendo Village, Sr. Florence visited a number of programs in the Chicago area, including a local AIDS organization, a domestic violence shelter, and a comprehensive agency that served the needs of the poor. From these visits, she gained insights about policies, regulations, and job descriptions that would help her in establishing her own not-for-profit organization. She also became involved in national and international AIDS organizations and met people from the National Catholic AIDS Network, who offered advice on Upendo Village.

The Wheaton Franciscans also helped Sr. Florence acquire the skills necessary to create a practical, realizable business plan with progressive goals. She learned techniques in working with boards of directors and became skilled in political advocacy. All this enabled Sr. Florence to develop her program not through crisis management but, rather, through stable, sustainable project management.

ADHERING TO CULTURAL NORMS

Back in Kenya, it was extremely important for Sr. Florence and her assistant, Sr. Martha Muneo, ASN, to follow local traditions and customs in order to gain support and approval for Upendo Village. They began by asking their congregation to send a letter to Bishop Peter Kairo, the bishop of Nakuru, seeking his support. Realizing the value of the project, the bishop asked the pastor of a church in the town of Naivasha if he could accommodate Upendo Village. The pastor brought

the proposal to the parish council leadership, which then brought it to the members of the parish.

The parish members were extremely supportive of the project. They had long wanted to do something to help those affected by HIV/AIDS, but they hadn't known what to do or how to get it started. The parish council gave Sr. Florence two classrooms on the parish grounds to remodel as a temporary site for Upendo Village.

Now that they had a site for the project, Sr. Florence and Sr. Martha established relationships with the various religious denominations in Kenya that work together to share resources and to meet the needs of their people afflicted by HIV/AIDS. They also registered the project with the nation's Department of Social Services so that they could apply for facility needs and government funding.

Once all of the paperwork was filed, Sr. Martha supervised the transformation of the two classrooms into homes for women and children with HIV/AIDS. In addition, she started making home visits to provide clients with counseling, food, and medicine. Meanwhile, Sr. Florence continued speaking to the parishes about the project. Slowly but surely, the people of Naivasha began to think of Upendo Village not as Sr. Florence's project but as "our" project.

ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY AND SUPPORT

While Sr. Florence was gathering support in Kenya, the Wheaton Franciscans and Fr. Larry Reuter, SJ, who was then associate vice president for mission and ministry at Loyola University Chicago, were busy developing the project's board of directors. To establish credibility for Upendo Village in the United States, they created a set of bylaws and filed the necessary paperwork with the U.S. government. They also applied for not-for-profit tax-exemption status with the Internal Revenue Service. Although board members were initially unsure of their role, they soon realized that their main job was to raise funds and gather resources for Upendo Village. To raise funds, they began writing grant proposals and submitting them to charitable foundations.

Although raising funds was difficult at first, seed money started to trickle in for the renovation of the classrooms and construction of the two additional buildings. Once people began to see results, donations began to increase. Sr. Florence also hired a professional grant writer to

develop a template for grant proposals.

In addition to writing grant proposals, the board solicited assistance from religious communities in the United States. Sr. Beatrice Hernandez, OSF, MD, a Wheaton Franciscan who is executive director of the Upendo Village Project (and a coauthor of this article), spoke about the project at All Saints Medical Center in Racine, WI. Her audience was composed of physicians and staff members of the Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare-Racine region. Sr. Beatrice explained that Upendo Village's greatest need was a second nurse to work with Sr. Martha. However, she said, a second nurse would cost \$700 a month.

When Sr. Beatrice finished her presentation, the system's leadership volunteered to sponsor a nurse for one year. As a result, a second nurse, Sr. Elizabeth Mbete, ASN, RN, was hired in January 2006. To sustain Sr. Elizabeth's work, Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare-Racine has included Upendo Village as part of its fund-raising campaign among staff members and volunteers. According to Kenneth Buser, president and CEO of Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare-Racine, Upendo Village has become a way for the organization to live out its mission globally. "Through the generosity of our associates we can live out the healing ministry of Jesus by ensuring that Upendo Village has what it needs to care for the men, women, and children of Kenya," he has said.

PROMOTING A VALUABLE CAUSE

Sr. Florence has now spent a considerable amount of time traveling around the United States working to increase awareness of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa. She has established an Upendo Village website that was designed and updated by Kenyan students studying in this country. She has conducted interviews with Chicago area media and has given talks in a variety of venues, including the dioceses of Joliet, IL, and Green Bay, WI, the Archdiocese of Chicago, and the American Medical Student Association.

In 2002, Sr. Florence helped form the DuPage Global AIDS Action Network, a student group inspired by a performance at Wheaton College by Bono, lead singer of the rock band U2. In New York City, she appeared at an event with Sr. Margaret Farley, RSM, a Yale University Divinity School ethicist who had recently returned from a

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Several years ago, an international group calling itself 1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize, launched a campaign to win the 2005 prize collectively for 1,000 women from more than 150 different countries. To honor Sr. Florence's efforts to raise awareness of the plight of those suffering from HIV/AIDS, the Wheaton Franciscans nominated her to be one of the 1,000 women.

REVEALING A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Upendo Village officially opened its doors in Naivasha in August 2002. There is no other service in the surrounding area like it. In fact, the program has become so successful that women from outlying areas come to Naivasha for care and assistance, especially after experiencing domestic violence or being infected with HIV by a sexual partner. The fact that they do come is a sign that the stigma of HIV/AIDS and domestic violence is breaking down. Women come to Upendo Village because it provides a structure that ensures their physical, economic, and emotional safety.

Upendo Village staff members pray regularly for people infected with the disease as well as for their families, asking for the strength to carry on the vital work in the area. Staff members believe that compassion and sensitivity are integral to the treatment of clients. They make a point of letting clients know that somebody cares about them. Since its inception, Upendo Village's mission and

vision has been based on one simple principle: We are called to help each other.

To date, more than 5,000 clients have received care and support from Sr. Florence and the Upendo Village staff and volunteers. Between them, Sr. Florence and the Wheaton Franciscans have raised more than \$400,000 to build the project and sustain it, so that more clients can receive care and so that additional services can be provided. Work is currently under way to give Upendo Village a permanent site on 3.5 acres of land donated by Bishop Kairo.

Sr. Florence credits Upendo Village's success to the people of Naivasha and to the Wheaton Franciscans for helping to form the administrative framework that provides the project's resources and financial assistance. Perhaps most of all, however, she credits the people of Kenya for doing something to help themselves.

By working together, Sr. Florence, the Wheaton Franciscans, and the people of Kenya are living the true meaning of charity and service toward thy neighbor. Drawing on the example set forth by St. Francis of Assisi, they provide hospitality, refuge, and care to the infirm. As Sr. Florence says, "If we can help even one out of the 2 million, then I think, for me, that will be a great achievement." Through its very existence, Upendo Village has revealed a glimmer of hope for the people of Kenya. ■

To learn more about Upendo Village, visit www.upendovillage.org.