

Students at the
Nyaka AIDS Orphans
School in Uganda.
Photo by Eric Rudd



by Janet Mandelstam

From the Heart of

INDIANA

To the Heart of

AFRICA

The distance between the heart of Indiana and the heart of Africa can be measured in more than miles. Few Bloomingtonians have experienced the poverty, disease, and war that are daily staples in many parts of Africa. But with their compassion, their commitment, their time, and their dollars, Bloomingtonians are bridging that distance.

Two Bloomington-based organizations are educating residents about Africa while educating African youth half a world away.

> Indiana Friends of Nyaka supports a school for AIDS orphans in Uganda, a country that lost virtually an entire generation to the disease.

> In neighboring Congo, plagued by years of internal conflict, Giving Back to Africa is supporting an orphanage and providing a master's-level education to university students who then will "give back" two years of service to their community.

The work of these organizations has galvanized civic organizations, local churches, and students of all ages—perhaps none more than Daniel Tritch. The 24-year-old Kelley School graduate says an IU class in African politics "changed my life. I was shocked and ashamed at what I didn't know." He's learned fast and is himself a bridge between the two organizations. In the summer of 2006, Tritch taught English and social studies at the Nyaka school; this past summer he joined the board of Giving Back to Africa. Now, he says, "the first thing I do in the morning is look at news of Africa. It's who I am. I know my calling."

Tritch is just one of many Bloomingtonians who have embraced the people and the challenges of Africa. Says Ann Marie Thomson, co-founder of Giving Back to Africa: "Bloomington is one of the most generous communities you will ever find."

Indiana Friends of Nyaka

photography by Eric Rudd

The Rev. David Bremer remembers the day Twesigye Jackson Kaguri walked into his office at United Presbyterian Church. “He said, ‘I’m starting a school in Uganda for orphan kids. Do you want to be involved?’”

Bremer was no stranger to appeals for church involvement in seemingly worthwhile projects. He had to be sure Kaguri, who was studying for a master’s degree in sociology at IU at the time, “was for real.” What he learned—and what much of Bloomington would soon learn—is that Kaguri’s brother and sister had died of AIDS, leaving four children, and that their story had been repeated countless times in Kaguri’s southwest Uganda homeland. He learned that Uganda had lost a generation of men and women between 25 and 40 to HIV/AIDS and that more than two million Ugandan children had lost one or both parents. He learned that Kaguri and his then-wife Beronda Montgomery were establishing the Nyaka AIDS Orphans School to provide a free education and much more for these children. And he liked what he heard.

Kaguri made a presentation at the church, was introduced to the Bloomington North Rotary Club and Sherwood Oaks Christian Church by businessman Otto Ray, and spoke to other groups around town. “None of us had any sense of what would happen,” Bremer recalls, “but we knew there was a need.”

Out of that need grew Indiana Friends of Nyaka, with Bremer and Ray as co-chairs. It was founded in 2003 to support the construction and maintenance of the school in the village of Nyakagezezi, just 200 meters from the place where Kaguri grew up.

“This was personal for me,” says Kaguri, who currently works in development at Michigan State University. “My brother had died of HIV, in my hands.”



(right) Eager to learn, students rush to class.

(below) Bloomington’s Brittany Linville, pictured with students Dan (left) and Irene, taught English, music, physical education, and art at Nyaka. *Photo taken by a student*



“I’ve never seen students work so hard, be so eager to learn, or be so appreciative.”



Twesigye Jackson Kaguri started the school. His brother and sister had died of AIDS.



The Rev. David Bremer heard the plea and answered the call.



Bloomington businessman Otto Ray is co-chair of Indiana Friends of Nyaka.

There have always been orphans in Uganda and people have taken care of them, he says, "but HIV took out the working people. We stepped in and said we are going to take care of these children, give them an education, and place them in homes."

Kaguri first thought of establishing an orphanage but wanted the children to remain as part of the community. Because children in orphanages are often isolated from the community, he and Montgomery decided on a school instead. They purchased two acres of land and began construction in 2001 when they were living in Bloomington. "We were building two classrooms, using our savings," Kaguri recalls. They returned to Uganda in January 2003 for the official opening of the school.

Some of the students were being raised by grandparents; others had no family. Kaguri approached villagers and asked them to be foster parents to the students. "I said, 'We will feed them breakfast and lunch, give them uniforms and books. We ask you to give them a place to sleep.' No one turned us down. For Africans, family still means an extended family." In return, Nyaka distributes free fruit and vegetable seeds to the host families, maintains a community garden, provides safe drinking water for the community, and encourages the families to participate in school activities.

Once the school was up and running, the road from Bloomington to Nyaka became well-traveled. Otto Ray, who visited the school with other members of Sherwood Oaks Church, says he "grew up in a WASP town. I never said hello to an African American until I was 18." Meeting the children, he said, showed him "how similar they are to kids everywhere." He made friendships on the soccer field and helped the students practice their English. "They aren't going to miss me, but I'm going to miss them."

For students like Daniel Tritch and Brittany Linville, teaching at Nyaka was a rewarding and joyous experience.

Tritch lived at the school for two months in the summer of 2006, teaching second-graders. "It was the best experience of my life," he says. "These kids appreciate education more than kids here. They come to school early, and the only absences are due to severe cases of malaria." He tells the story of a boy named Allan whose legs are crippled. "The other kids line up to push him to school [in his wheelchair]. I thought I would like to push him one day, but Allan is so popular that I was told to put my name on the waiting list." Tritch's joy was tempered by attending a funeral for a student who had died of AIDS. "I was sitting there listening to the sermon in the local language, and I realized how much of a way of life this is for them."

Linville, a 2007 IU graduate, went to Uganda in 2007 and 2008 to teach English, music, physical education, and art at Nyaka. "I've never seen students work so hard, be so eager to learn, or be so appreciative," she



(above) Some of the students are being raised by grandparents. Others have no family.

(left) Daniel Tritch with his pal Allan. In late November, Allan was flown to the United States where he was accepted as a charity patient at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor. It is hoped that an operation will restore the use of his legs. *Courtesy photo*



(left) A young girl walks past a mural on the side of the school.

(bottom left) The school. There are now 216 students in six classrooms.

(below) The first class will graduate from the 7th grade on December 28.



“Five years ago these children had nothing. We’ve given them hope.”



(above) A sign on the road to the school.

(above right) Two-thirds of the students are girls because boys have other educational opportunities.

(right) Kambuga, the largest village nearby.



says. “Some of them walk two hours each way to school. I came home and saw all of my stuff, and I started crying. Why do I need all of this?” Linville spoke at the 2007 annual Indiana Friends banquet and shares her Nyaka experiences with students in local classrooms.

Although Nyaka is an elementary school, the students range in age from 5 to 18 years. “We agreed that we would take sixty-five percent girls,” says Kaguri. Most of the girls are older because they’ve had fewer educational opportunities than boys. This year there are 216 children in primary grades 1-7, and the first class will graduate in December with several supporters from Bloomington in attendance.

Indiana Friends of Nyaka is helping to raise funds to provide scholarships for those graduates who qualify for secondary school. Those who don’t continue their formal education will receive vocational training. In the four years of its existence Indiana Friends has purchased a van for the school and has provided a roto-tiller for the garden, sewing machines for vocational training, school supplies, and funds for the school nurse to provide free basic health care.

Much of this largesse is a result of the annual Indiana Friends of Nyaka Benefit Banquet. “Otto Ray and I had the first Nyaka banquet in 2004,” Bremer recalls. “There were twenty or so attendees and we raised \$2,000.”

Alan Pease, secretary at United Presbyterian, is coordinator of the banquet, which in 2007 brought in \$25,000. “It keeps growing every year,” he says. “People are seeing the tangible results of the money they are giving.” Sponsorships from local businesses and individuals pay for the dinner, “so the proceeds from the tickets go directly to Uganda.”

Support for the Nyaka School is growing nationally and internationally. The organization now has a national board and Friends groups in Michigan, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Kampala, the Ugandan capital, as well as donors in many countries around the world. But it all started here in Bloomington.

“Without Indiana Friends of Nyaka, we wouldn’t be where we are today,” says Kaguri.

“We were the first church in the world to get involved,” adds Bremer. “I’m proud of that.”

What Nyaka offers now is a model that can be transported and adapted in other parts of the world. By providing free education in a community setting, the Nyaka AIDS Orphans School is helping to combat hunger and poverty.

“Five years ago these children had nothing,” says Bremer. “We’ve given them hope. They will now go to secondary school or learn a trade. All will be contributors to society. We are literally changing the political and social landscape of southwest Uganda without a shot being fired. It’s a miracle.”

Although Nyaka is an elementary school, students range in age from 5 to 18.





One can now see hope in the eyes of these children, where once there was only despair.

Giving Back to Africa

photography by Dr. Louis J. Calli



Bloomington's Ann Marie Thomson, co-founder of Giving Back to Africa, in the classroom.

“Malembe, malembe” is like a mantra in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It means “slowly, slowly,” and that’s just how Giving Back to Africa (GBA) is building its Scholars program in Congo.

By educating two master’s-level scholars each year, GBA will not change Congo overnight. “It will take generations,” says co-founder Ann Marie Thomson. “You don’t work in Congo thinking you’re going to be there a short time. A short-term project is ten years.” But the future of the strife-torn country, she says, rests in the ability of young people to create and lead fundamental social change.

That’s the training GBA is providing at Protestant University in Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, and at an orphanage and school it supports outside of Kinshasa. The goal of the program is to strengthen Congolese society by giving intelligent, service-oriented students the opportunity to make their country a smarter, safer place.

“We’re not under any delusions,” says Thomson. “The level of poverty is difficult to communicate. The government is corrupt and dysfunctional; the health and education systems have collapsed. But anyone who has been there can’t walk away.”

The program has deep meaning for Thomson, an adjunct professor in IU’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs who spent the first 18 years of her life in Congo. The daughter of missionaries—her father was a teacher, her mother a nurse—she says Congo “provided the most wonderful childhood I could have had. Congolese children were my first friends.”

She left in 1973 to attend college in the United States and didn’t return until 1990. “I saw a significant drop in the quality of life,” she recalls. But she also was “inspired by the capacity of human beings to survive under dire circumstances.” It was a young boy, the son of one of her old friends, who provided the inspiration for GBA. “He said he wanted to be a doctor,” Thomson recalls, “and I was determined to help him.” Her partner, Bloomington cardiologist Louis J. Calli, saw a bigger picture. Why do it for just one person, he asked. And so Thomson and Calli created Giving Back to Africa in 2003.

“It took two or three years to educate ourselves” before starting the Scholars program, Thomson says. That education included two trips to Congo, focus groups,

(below) The first two master's scholars, Masani Matshi Desy and Malivo Kagaba Jeannot.



and input from experts on the situation in the country. Along on one of those research trips was Abbey Martin, a graduate of Bloomington High School South, holder of a master's degree from IU in international comparative education policy, and soon to become GBA's in-country project director.

Martin helped develop the four-year curriculum, participated in the selection of the first scholars, Masani Matshi Desy and Malivo Kagaba Jeannot, and moved to Congo to direct the program for the 2007-2008 academic year. She lived in a Congolese neighborhood where life "was a constant slap of human hardship." The Congo River, one of the mightiest in the world, flows past Kinshasa, yet Martin had no running water in her apartment.

The ten applicants for that first Scholars program—part of the 1 percent of Congolese who attend university—

(above) The orphanage serves as a laboratory for students in the Scholars program.

(right) Bloomington's Abbey Martin consoles Ruth, 8, who is feeling a little sad.



faced rigorous exams and interviews. "We were looking for people who wanted to stay in Congo and improve the country," Martin says. Classes were designed to foster an ethic of service and to teach approaches to community and economic development. While at the university, the scholars practice their new skills in the field at the GBA-supported home for orphans and street children. When they graduate next spring, they will "give back" two years of service to a community in Congo.

"The orphanage is their laboratory," says Calli. "It's where they learn to manage an organization, how to raise funds, and how to establish links with other organizations." The orphanage, which provides a home, an education, and health care for the children, also clearly demonstrates that "there is no place in Congo where you can just deal with long-term needs, because there are so many short-term needs," Calli says. To meet those short-term needs GBA makes a cash donation every year to pay teachers' salaries and provide food for the children. Support of the Scholars program is its long-term investment in Congo's future.

On their most recent visit to the orphanage last spring, Thomson and Calli delivered two heavy suit-cases full of gifts—clothing, soccer balls, drawing materials—donated by a class of junior high students in northern Indiana. And they saw the new girls' and boys' dormitories that were built as a result of a link that Martin had established between the orphanage and the nonprofit Rivers of the World.

After helping to select the second group of scholars, Martin, 27, is back in Indiana now, serving on the GBA board of directors and studying ways to strengthen communities through education. It was always the plan that the Scholars program would be Congolese-run, and the board is currently looking for a Congolese project director.

In addition to Martin, Thomson, and Calli, the 12-member board includes Thomson's 83-year-old father, who spent 40 years in Congo, and academics who have studied the country. Among the members from Bloomington are Osita Afoaku, outreach director in the African Studies Program at IU, and Lori Garraghty of the Monroe County United Way, who lived in Kinshasa. On the board's agenda are working out the details of the giving-back projects and spreading the word about the situation in Congo.

From elementary school to the halls of IU, the word is spreading in Bloomington. Students in Lana Cummings' fourth grade class at Binford Elementary sent school supplies to the orphanage in Congo and drew pictures of their lives in Bloomington. In return the children at the orphanage wrote letters about themselves (in French, later translated) and sent back artwork of their own. The art from both countries was exhibited



"The level of poverty is difficult to communicate. The government is corrupt and dysfunctional; the health and education systems have collapsed. But anyone who has been there can't walk away."

The orphans, staff, and teachers.

How You Can Contribute

Indiana Friends of Nyaka
Send checks made out to "Nyaka AIDS Orphans School" to United Presbyterian Church, Attn: Karen Like, 1701 E. 2nd St., Bloomington, IN 47401

Giving Back to Africa
Go to: www.givingbackafrica.org
Click on "Support Us."

side by side recently in Bloomington.

That exhibit was an important educational tool, says Dani Walker, an IU junior majoring in African studies and president of the Giving Back to Africa Student Association. "If you can see similarities, form a conclusion that they are like us, you will be much more willing to care," Walker says. The GBA Student Association helps to raise funds and raise awareness about issues in Congo. Now it is trying to replicate the Binford experience on the college level.

"We made a journal to share our culture with the first two GBA scholars," Walker says. "We wrote about ourselves and included pictures of IU." They are hoping the scholars will reciprocate and establish an ongoing dialogue.

While GBA is increasing public awareness of the challenges in Congo, it also has become a natural home for those who already were passionate about Africa. Abbey Martin spent her junior year in South Africa; Executive Director Meghann Beer worked at a preschool in Kenya and has chaperoned high school students to Kenya and Tanzania the past two summers; Dani Walker learned about the plight of women in Congo when she was still in high school and "searching for what I wanted to do."

And, of course, Congo is never far from Ann Marie

Thomson's thoughts. She makes many presentations in Bloomington—to women's groups, at churches, in schools—telling the story of Congo and GBA and raising needed funds.

The organization is supported by "a large base of dedicated donors and small grants primarily from family foundations," says Executive Director Beer. Martin says donors can be assured that when they sign a check, "there's no doubt that what we do over here is met with effort, hard work, and compassion over there."

While daily headlines tell of strife in eastern Congo, the current fighting is far from Kinshasa and hasn't impacted the program. With the selection of its second class of scholars from an applicant pool that grew to 28 this year, GBA is moving forward. When the program is fully functioning, there will be eight scholars.

"This may seem small and insignificant," says Martin, "but the ability of one person to effect change in a community is profound. The real marker is the second [class of scholars]. The first is a leap of faith. Now we've taken the second step and we still want to walk together."

Thomson says her dream is to have an alumni association of scholars, "a cohort of committed, mutually supportive young people" who are having an impact on Congolese society. She has another dream, too: in ten years, to replicate GBA in other countries.

Malembe, malembe. ✧



An evening with Krista Detor

to benefit Indiana Friends of Nyaka and Giving Back to Africa

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