

Hope for slum's street kids

Local woman known as “jajja” to poor Ugandan children works to improve their lives

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The poor, desperate children who live on the streets in the slums of Kampala, Uganda, call Diane Reiner “jajja.” It’s slang for grandmother, or a loving maternal presence.

Reiner has embodied that term of endearment after being introduced in 2006 to Ronnie Sseruyange, a Kampala orphan who overcame the grim experience of living on the streets for 10 years as a youth.

After forging a friendship, the two have teamed up to raise awareness of the plight of street kids in Uganda. They are also raising funds to help house, feed and educate those left to fend for themselves due to the death of parents and relatives from HIV/AIDS, civil war and disease. Some kids fled abusive households or migrated to the urban center from rural villages mired in poverty.

“Ronnie motivated me to get involved and stay involved. His heart is huge for the kids,” said Reiner, 66, a retired state employee who visited Uganda six years ago as part of a photography workshop. She wanted to document the kids lost to the streets, begging and scrounging for food in garbage piles amid the slums in the capital city of nearly 2 million.

“It was a chance meeting that changed my life,” said Reiner, of Colonie. She was introduced to Sseruyange, who is now 26 years old and a role model for the youths known as “the chairman of the street kids.” With Reiner’s financial support, he has taken 15 kids ages 4 to 14 under his wing and helped get them shelter and food.

Reiner and Sseruyange are forming a not-for-profit group called Jajja’s Kids.

Reiner made her third trip to Uganda this summer and paid for Sseruyange to fly here this fall. He’s staying with Reiner and her husband, Ray Koloski, and is also completing a residency at Heifer International’s Learning Center at Overlook Farm in Rutland, Mass. He is learning farming skills he can teach the kids in Uganda. The long-term goal is to help the orphans become self-sufficient and to break away from the cycle of poverty and hopelessness on the streets of the slums. “I want to help these kids have some hope,” she said.

Sseruyange supports himself by working in a used clothing store and devotes his free time to working with street kids. “They listen to me because I came from the streets. I speak their language,” he said.

Sseruyange never knew his father. He was raised mostly by his grandmother, who died when he was four. His mother died of complications from AIDS when he was 6. He joined the vast underground of orphaned street kids in Kampala.



Ugandan Ronnie Sseruyange, left, and Diane Reiner look over some of Diane’s photographs of homeless youth on the streets of Kampala, Uganda in the kitchen of Diane’s Colonie home Friday Oct. 19, 2012. Reiner met Sseruyange after he was living as a homeless youth on the streets in Uganda. Now, Reiner has started a program, Jajja’s Kids, to help the street kids of Kampala. (John Carl D’Annibale / Times Union)



Diane Reiner, left, and Ronnie Sseruyange, whom Reiner met after he was living as a homeless youth on the streets of Kampala, Uganda, walk in the yard of Reiner's home on the banks of the Mohawk River in Colonie Friday Oct. 19, 2012. Now, Reiner has started a program, Jajja's Kids, to help the street kids of Kampala. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

kids of Kampala and she sells some of her photographs to help raise funds for Jajja's Kids. She and Sseruyange are also planning their first major fundraiser on Oct. 28 in Albany. It will include African music, food and crafts and a discussion of their project.

Reiner never expected to be leading such an effort. "I started out by putting a Band-Aid on the situation," she said. "But there is such a need, I felt compelled to do something more."

Their long-term goal is to purchase land, build a farmhouse and to sustain the program by housing street kids there and putting them to work raising crops and tending farm animals.

Sseruyange is thankful for his surrogate family. Reiner's son, Jake Reiner, an organic farmer and house builder who lives near Mt. Fuji in Japan, is helping his mom with the project. He's coming home to visit later this month and will help in the planning.

Sseruyange will return to Kampala at the end of November ready to do carry out Reiner's plans. "She's my grandma, after all, my jajja," he said.

"The police beat us for no reason. We hide from them," he said. They often take shelter in culverts and drainage tunnels, but get flooded out in heavy rains. Kids have been known to die in flash floods.

Most nights, he spread out newspapers along the side of the street and slept fitfully with a group of kids. He begged and found food scraps tossed out by shopkeepers or dug through garbage piles. He was often beaten up by homeless teenagers. He has no formal schooling, but taught himself English and managed to find a job and an apartment. As his prospects improved, he didn't forget about the kids on the street.

Reiner has gradually expanded her involvement from funding Friday meals to health checkups with a nurse to underwriting a modest living space for 15 boys. They sleep in a garage on worn mattresses, but it is a step up from being exposed to the elements on the street.

Their next goal is to rent a house, to pay for schooling and to feed the 15 boys. They estimate it will cost about \$20,000 a year.

"They've got a dry place to sleep. They've got their friends and some security for the first time," she said. "They're very happy and they're thriving."

Reiner continues to document the lives of the street



Ronnie Sseruyange, center, works with children in Kampala, Uganda. Diane Reiner, of Colonie, has teamed up with Sseruyange to develop program called Jajja's Kids, which helps the street kids in the slums of Kampala. (Courtesy Diane Reiner)

