

A champion for Uganda's street kids

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Ronnie Sseruyange, sitting in front of a small but sympathetic audience, is overcome by emotion and begins crying.

This is not a child, but a 26-year-old man. He is overwhelmed, though, that so many strangers are interested in his story. It isn't just his story, however. It's the story of thousands of children in Uganda today.

At the age of 6, Ronnie Sseruyange became homeless. According to UNICEF, as many as 10,000 children live on the streets in Uganda, many of them migrating from the provinces to the capital city of Kampala. War, poverty, hunger and disease have forced them to fend for themselves in impossible circumstances.



Ronnie told his story in late October at the Woman's Club of Albany, which hosted a benefit for Jajja's Kids, founded by one of the club's members, Diane Reiner of Colonie.

In Kampala, Reiner is called "jajja," which means "grandmother," by the street children she's helping. When Ronnie breaks down before his Albany audience, Reiner is sitting next to him, offering a reassuring pat and words of encouragement.

The two met in 2006 when Reiner was in Uganda for a photography workshop. She wanted to take pictures of the street children and was introduced to Ronnie, who by then was no longer living on the street but remained connected to the kids. He was known as the "chairman" of the street kids because he counseled them, protected them and helped them whenever possible. More than most, he understood them.

He had been raised mostly by his grandmother, and when she died, it left him alone with his mother, who was terminally ill with HIV/AIDS. Before she died, she told him he had to find his way to Kampala. At an age when most American children are entering first grade, Ronnie was on his own and attempting to make the trip on foot to Kampala. He was wary of everyone, including the strange man who forced Ronnie to accompany him to his home for a meal. The 6-year-old Ronnie was convinced the stranger planned to eat him.

There is trafficking in children in Uganda, according to UNICEF representatives there. A harsh climate, where drought, poverty and insecure food supply are prevalent, make children easy prey for those promising a better life.

Ronnie's rescuer, however, really wanted to help him. He took the child home, gave him food and counseled him to the extent that there's any useful advice one might give to a homeless orphan.

The child, heeding his mother's instructions, eventually found his way to Kampala, where he was welcomed by an older youth who punched him so hard he suffered a broken jaw. He tells the story today as if it's just what happens when you're a child on your own in Uganda.

Ronnie wound up living on the streets for 10 years until he was able to move into a youth shelter. He never went to school but he's an intelligent young man who taught himself to speak English. Reiner says she was touched by Ronnie's efforts to help the street children. She founded Jajja's Kids in the United States to raise money for the program Ronnie established in Kampala, called the Former Street Children of Uganda.

It was a decision that would surprise no one who knows Reiner, who has traveled the globe in pursuit of her passion for photography and for cross-cultural understanding. She says in a Jajja's Kids pamphlet that she was captivated by "the beauty of the Ugandan countryside, the warmth of its people and the simplicity of their lives ..."

Jajja's Kids aims to elevate both the street children and the society in which they exist. The project, with money provided by Reiner, has provided counseling, cleanliness, medical support, classes in English, math and art and tuition for secondary, post-secondary and occupational training.

At present, 20 boys (ages 4 to 15) are fed every day and sleep in a dry garage on mattresses. Reiner says they hope to rent a four-room house next year. "And we hope to have enough funds to also feed 14 to 15 boys and enroll them in school."

She says the long-term goal is to have a farm and permanent home in five years. The farm would enable the boys to become at least partly self-sustaining by raising crops and animals.

Right now, Ronnie is picking up valuable skills that will help with those goals. He has been in this country since mid-August, staying with Reiner and her husband, Ray Koloski, and working as an education volunteer at Heifer International's demonstration farm in Rutland, Mass.

Jake Reiner, Diane's son, is an organic farmer in Japan who has been involved with Ronnie and Jajja's Kids for a long time. He was instrumental in the invitation Ronnie received from Heifer International. "Jake will design the structures we build for the kids once we get our own land," his mother said. They hope to have the farm operating in five years. "Other goals for the near term -- return some of the street children to their families and continue the Friday Program in the slums, which actually operates five days a week to provide education to children who may have a parent but have no opportunity to go to school," Diane Reiner said.

Jajja's Kids has raised the money needed to rent a house in 2013, and now needs to fundraise for beds and mattresses. Once that's accomplished, they will look for sponsors for each of the boys. "We will nurture the sponsor-child relationship with technology such as Skype," she said.