

From Uganda to Albany, with singing and laughter Skype session links students from Uganda, Albany

Times Union, Albany, New York

February 11, 2014, by Paul Grondahl

The 14 children in Kampala, Uganda, orphans rescued from the streets of the capital's desperate slums, held up cards and pictures they received from second-graders at the Delaware Community School in Albany.

They laughed when they got to see and talk to the kids who made the drawings during a Skype session Tuesday morning.

With the help of Ruth Pelham of Music Mobile, who taught songs to the children in Kampala's slums, the kids bridged a cultural gap and geographical distance of 7,000 miles as they sang a song, "Peace Is All Around."

The Ugandan kids sang the simple tune in English and the Albany students sang it in the Ugandan language of Luganda: "Mukwano munsiyona." They repeated the phrase several times.

Finally, the two groups sang it together in both languages as they watched each other via computer webcams and tried to focus on the song as they giggled and waved to each other.

The Music Mobile exchange was part of a grass-roots effort to raise awareness and to ease the plight of street kids in Uganda through a local not-for-profit group called Jajja's Kids. Jajja is slang for grandmother, or a loving maternal presence.



Susan Fowler, at right, and her Delaware Community School 2nd grade class, Skype talk with students from Kampala, Uganda Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014, in Albany, N.Y. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)



Delaware Community School 2nd graders Skype talk with Music Mobile's Ruth Pelham and students from Kampala, Uganda Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014, in Albany, N.Y. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

Jajja's Kids was started in 2006 by Diane Reiner, a retired state employee who lives in Colonie. She first visited Kampala as part of a photography workshop, and she was deeply moved as she documented kids as young as 5 or 6 who begged on the streets and scrounged in garbage piles for food in their struggle for survival.

Reiner teamed with Ronnie Sseruyange, 28, a former Kampala orphan who lived on the streets for 10 years and became a leader and role model for the younger orphans. With the help of Capital Region donors, Jajja's Kids in the past 18 months has progressed from giving shelter and meals to a few orphaned kids in a converted garage.

Today, the group rents a house where 14 boys between the ages of 5 and 13 live in a family setting, and all of them are attending school full time.

"I'm very happy by how far we've come," said Sseruyange, who runs the house. He visited Reiner in Colonie in 2012 and attended a fundraiser in Albany.

"The generosity of people has been overwhelming. We're getting so much support and positive energy," Reiner said Tuesday by Skype in Kampala. It was 6 p.m., humid and in the mid-80s.

Reiner was joined on this visit by Pelham and six other local residents who volunteered their time and paid for their own airfare and lodging. They also brought seven large duffel bags of donated goods, including books, clothes and soccer balls.

Pelham had been singing with 70 children in the slums. She helped them make simple musical instruments with nails and bottle caps known as jingle sticks, the same type she has taught inner-city kids across Albany to make since 1977 through Music Mobile.

"No matter where they're from, kids love to sing and there's a hopefulness and vitality that comes from singing together," said Pelham, who taught the kids of Kampala her song, *We're All A Family Under One Sky*. "That feeling is the same all over the world."

The students in Susan Fowler's class in Albany are a diverse group, with several Burmese refugees who were born in refugee camps in Thailand, one from Iraq and several whose parents are from Puerto Rico or Mexico.



Delaware Community School students, including 2nd grader Anhur Abdulnabi, center, Skype talk with students from Kampala, Uganda Tuesday Feb. 11, 2014, in Albany, N.Y. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)



Delaware Community School 2nd graders, from left, Rebeca Navedo, Yee Noe Khan and Wah Law Skype talk with students from Kampala, Uganda Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014, in Albany, N.Y. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

The kids got to ask each other questions. Anhur Abdulnabi asked about their favorite subject in school in Kampala. "English" was the resounding answer.

They discovered that each group likes to play soccer, baseball and volleyball. They share a fondness for french fries, although the Ugandan kids called them "chips" in British fashion. They inquired about American hot dogs, and a second-grader gamely ventured that it was a sort of meat put on a bread roll that could be served with ketchup or mustard.

"I thought it was fun," Natalia Danzy said after the Skype talk.

"I liked learning the song in Luganda," Azariah Killian said.

"It was cool. They were nice," said Moo Gay Soe.

"I liked how they spoke another language," said Weller Paw.

Their teacher added, "Now we have new friends around the world."

Before they signed off from Skype, the children on both sides of the Atlantic raised two fingers in an international symbol. It was the peace sign, and it needed no translation.