



Clockwise: A child shows off his mother's work; BeadforLife members celebrate their good fortune; a sampling of the beads; Torkin Wakefield, right, with Jaja Josephine; rolling paper into beads.

TREASURES from afar

HOW A SOUVENIR NECKLACE INSPIRED THREE WOMEN TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF UGANDAN FAMILIES HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD. BY SUSAN SKOG

To be of service—that has always been Torkin Wakefield's driving goal. But when the Boulder, Colorado, psychotherapist set out for Africa in January 2004, she had no idea how many people her work there would touch. She and her husband, Charles Steinberg, M.D., planned to spend three months in Kampala, Uganda, where he would train AIDS doctors. But as the trip began, she wondered, what would her role be?

Torkin knew there were great needs in Uganda. For over 18 years the coun-

try has been plagued by brutal civil war. More than 1.5 million people have fled their homes for camps and slums in places like Kampala, the country's capital; a marginal population has been forced to live even closer to the edge.

One of the displaced is Millie Grace Akena, a member of the Acholi tribe in northern Uganda. A widow, she settled in the slums of Kampala and focused on finding ways to support her four children and the three AIDS orphans she had adopted. Uganda, like much of

(continued)





Bearer Grace Acan, top, shows off a colorful choker—and her baby twins. Florence Acayo, above, left school when she was orphaned. Now married with a child, she's active in BeadforLife.

Africa, has been devastated by the AIDS epidemic, and it is quite common for families to take in children of relatives, friends and neighbors.

Millie could earn a dollar a day crushing quarry rocks for 10 hours in the hot sun. But she had a better idea: An aid worker had taught her to make beads by tightly rolling, then varnishing thin strips of discarded magazine pages; Millie would find a way of selling them, somehow, in the global marketplace.

An energetic woman, Millie also taught 45 of the neighboring women in the Acholi Quarter of Kampala. Day after day, the women sat outside their one-room huts, stringing the beads into bracelets, necklaces and chokers and selling them to the occasional passersby.

AN IDEA IS BORN

Toward the end of Torkin's three-month stay, her friend of 20 years, Ginny Jordan, came for a visit. On a walk one day, the two friends spotted Millie sitting against the wall of her mud home, her

lap overflowing with beads. "I bought three necklaces and put one right on," Torkin says. "In the next three days, I received so many compliments that I gave two of the necklaces away to my Ugandan friends, who then demanded to know where I got them! That's when I got the idea that here was a cottage industry ready to be born."

Around this time Torkin's husband's stay was extended, and she realized her next step would be to help Millie and the others turn bead making into the kind of enterprise that could transform their hard lives. Torkin and Ginny returned to Millie's neighborhood and bought 100 necklaces, which Ginny took back to the United States to sell. The question: Would there be enough enthusiasm to ensure a market for them back home?

They needn't have worried. The response was phenomenal—and the BeadforLife project was born. Though Torkin and Ginny had no business background, they began lining up bead makers and setting up ways to sell their product. Torkin's daughter, Devin Hibbard, 34, also had come for a visit and quickly agreed to stay and help Torkin with the operations in Uganda. Within months, mother and daughter had organized 160 women to make beads that they could then sell. Meanwhile, Ginny took charge of operations in the U.S., though she tries to visit Uganda once a year.

People in the U.S. and Canada have enthusiastically supported the project through online jewelry sales (BeadforLife.com) and in-home BeadWear parties (see "Host a BeadWear Party," left), community fairs and school fund-raisers. Last year more than 500 parties were held.

After almost two years, BeadforLife's success is astonishing. Most bead makers have tripled their annual income. "For the first time they're feeding their families three meals a day," says Torkin. "Children are getting clothes and medicine, and many of them are in school who weren't before." Torkin estimates that BeadforLife women are directly supporting more than 1,600 people.

Host a BeadWear Party

Get in on the BeadforLife action. First, reserve a date at beadforlife.org. You'll then receive a BeadWear Party Pack, including African recipes, a DVD about BeadforLife, pictures and bios of the bead makers, sales forms and inventory sheets. You'll also be sent jewelry to sell at the party. You don't make a cash outlay, but a credit card is required. Invite friends, family, neighbors and coworkers to learn about BeadforLife and to buy the products. Prices range from \$5 for a simple bangle bracelet to \$50 for a large purse. All profits go directly back to the Kampala beading community.

Some of the proceeds from bead sales are reserved by BeadforLife to help the overall community. Recognizing that many basic needs were still going unmet in Uganda, BeadforLife set up a way for the women to trade beads for things like mosquito nets (important for malaria prevention) and eyeglasses, at a reduced price. "It might seem logical just to give the families what they need," explains Devin. "But what we have learned is that people prefer meaningful work to hand-outs. Earning something gives them pride and self-esteem."

The beaders also now have access to another vital product: infant rehydration kits. That idea came to Ginny one day while she was talking with one of the beaders and saw something move under the blanket on the woman's lap. "It was a baby, so sick with malaria she hadn't been able to eat for 10 days. I was stunned." Ginny saw to it that the baby got medical attention—and discovered that the only thing the infant needed was hydration. "That's when we came up with the plan to make rehydration kits easily accessible," she says. The kits include a powder to mix with clean water to replenish key minerals, salts and fluids in babies who might otherwise die from the dehydrating effects of diarrhea and vomiting.

THE REWARDS OF SUCCESS

Several dozen beaders have been able to use their newfound income to start alternative businesses. The idea is for families to diversify their income sources and not be totally and indefinitely dependent on the bead project. Joan Ahimbisibwe, an HIV-positive mother of three, saved enough to buy a pig and rent a one-room storefront where she sells sugar, vegetables and other items. She's saving up to buy land and build a home—presently the family lives at the store, rolling out mattresses behind the counter at night.

Other Programs

There are many organizations that help people in developing nations support themselves. Here, a few worth checking out:

Equal Exchange. Coffee, tea and cocoa from farmer co-ops in developing nations. equalexchange.com

Global Girlfriend: Everything from homemade soaps to hand-knit sweaters created by women in the U.S. and abroad. globalgirlfriend.com

Global Mamas. Batik sarongs and other apparel handmade by African women and girls. globalmamas.org

One World Projects. Hundreds of unique items from all over the world. oneworldprojects.com

Beyond the Banyan Tree. Weavings and folk art produced by women and their families in Thailand, Laos and Indonesia. beyondthebanyantree.com

Ten Thousand Villages. Crafts from artisans in over 30 countries. tentousandvillages.com

HandCrafting Justice. An assortment of arts and crafts from over a dozen countries. handcraftingjustice.org



Torkin and Ginny are excited about the beaders' ability to create a sustainable, long-term community. Most of the beaders are enrolled in savings plans. Some are going for vocational training. The project has partnered with Habitat for Humanity, which will assist women in building new homes. "We're in the process of buying 40 acres outside of Kampala," says Devin. "We hope to break ground on the first 10 homes this fall. The women are very excited." The community will include a light-industry section where the men will be able to work at things like poultry farming or brick making.

The beaders themselves have shown remarkable initiative. In early 2005, they raised funds among themselves to create a building where they can work and sell their product out of the sun. The beaders carried supplies on foot from the lumberyard 5 miles away, then built the 20- by 50-foot structure. Beaders who were too weak for the physical labor made meals for the workers.

The building was done in six days. When Torkin went to see it, the women ran to her, laughing and crying. "Tell me how this happened!" Torkin said.

Alice Acomo proudly stepped forward to explain: "Poor people have ways of making our lives work," she said. "We have options, resources and creativity. We work together to accomplish our dreams. We are determined. This is how we survive."



A group of Acholi women gather to talk and share stories as they roll beads, top. Cultures connect, above.

Torkin says, "I was speechless. All I could do was cry."

Clearly, BeadforLife has profoundly touched every person involved. "I think this project captures people so deeply because it addresses needs on both continents," says Ginny. "Women in the States hunger for greater meaning. Women in Africa hunger to have their basic needs met. We can help and learn from each other."

Torkin agrees: "BeadforLife offers all of us an understanding that we are connected and we all have value." Adds Devin, "We have been incredibly humbled by the spark that has been ignited in the hearts of thousands of women across North America. We are united with our Ugandan sisters by what concerns us all—wanting what's best for our families." ●