

Stick by Stick a Bundle Makes

~African proverb

Women Use Beads to Change Lives

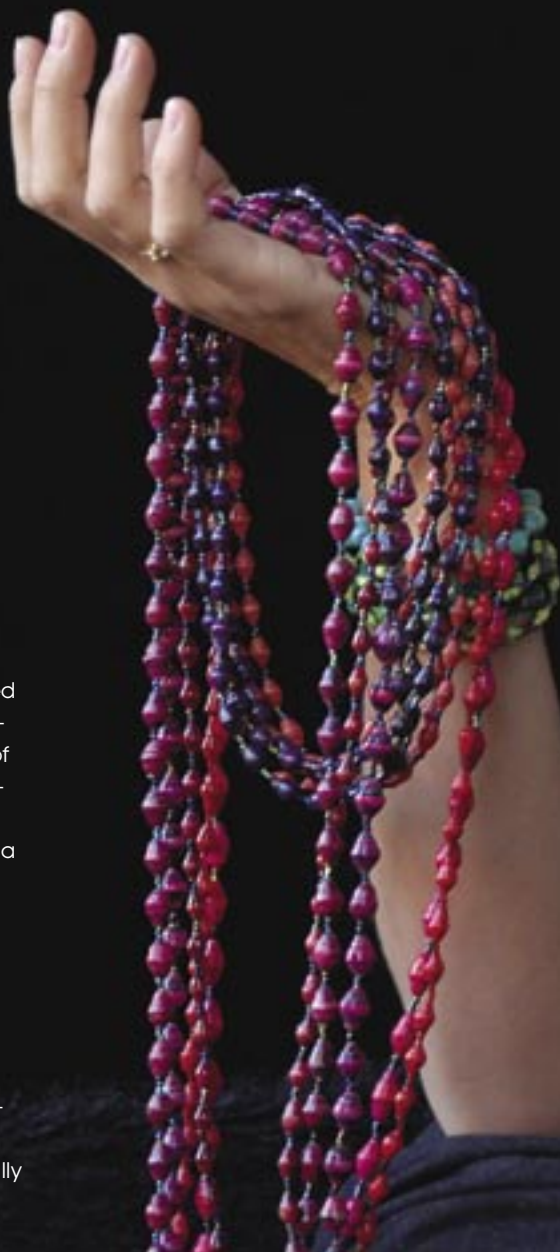
BY KAREN REED-MATHEE

Two years ago, Mary Naiga was living in a mud hovel in Uganda, supporting her four children by begging neighbors to let her wash their laundry for a small donation. Gaunt and weak, the 25-year-old woman refused to take life-saving AIDS drugs provided by the local free hospital because she'd heard the medicines increased appetite and she was already having difficulty getting enough food for her children.

Then Mary met Devin Hibbard and two other women who recognized the potential of a modest vocation — rolling beads out of colored paper — to lift women out of poverty. Through the creation of the non-profit BeadforLife, Mary's life took a turn for the better, as did the lives of other Ugandan women, most of whom have HIV/AIDS and/or are refugees from the war in Northern Uganda.

In April 2004, Devin Hibbard was walking through a slum in Kampala with her mother, Torkin Wakefield. Wakefield lives in Uganda with her husband, an AIDS doctor who runs a training program for physicians in Southern Uganda. Hibbard and her mother met a woman rolling beads and purchased necklaces from her. Back in the U.S., all 100 necklaces sold. "People liked the beads, but they *really* liked the story of these women and their families," says Hibbard, who lives on Bainbridge Island with her husband and son.

Heartened by the reception to the beads, which are cut from colored paper, carefully rolled into a shell-like shape, glued and lightly varnished, Hibbard, Wakefield and a friend, Ginny Jordan, officially







ABOVE: MARY NAIGA WITH HER CHILDREN BEFORE SHE ENROLLED IN BEADFORLIFE. PHOTO BY DEVIN HIBBARD

RIGHT: A RECENT PHOTO OF A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER MARY AT THE BEADFORLIFE OFFICE IN UGANDA. PHOTO BY CHARLES STEINBERG



founded BeadforLife in September 2004. They developed a sales strategy that is primarily woman-to-woman: home parties and events, supplemented by sales by volunteers and through the BeadforLife Web site. Net profits are returned to the bead-ers in Uganda through direct buying of beads, and are invested in their communi-ties through programs that provide health care, housing, education and vocational training assistance.

In December 2004, a small but effective article on BeadforLife in Oprah Winfrey's *O* magazine resulted in thousands of visits to the group's Web site and hundreds of bead parties. BeadforLife has now enrolled 165 bead makers, many of them referred by the AIDS hospital, says Hibbard. "We asked them to recruit their poorest patients." And those women, she figures, are supporting roughly 3,000 people. They represent 16 different tribes; most of the women have an elemen-tary school education or less.

According to the organization's 2005 annual report, together the bead-ers were paid \$128,919 over the year at sales that occurred every two weeks. In a country where women generally live on less than a dollar a day, the average beader earned more than \$860 for the year. "They're getting pride," says Hibbard. "They're going home to their families and saying, 'Look what I made. I have a skill that's valuable.'"

BeadforLife's goal is to work with several groups of women, and to graduate one group out of the program after three years, once the members are financially secure and have their own successful cottage industries in place — which some have already, employ-ing others to work for them. In the meantime, the next group can be trained. "We want to be able to reach out to more and more women," Hibbard says. "We'd like BeadforLife to be a conveyor belt out of poverty."

Last year, BeadforLife hired a fulfillment manager, a volunteer/events coordinator and business manager for its office in the U.S. In Uganda, the staff now numbers seven. Beyond organizing and promoting bead par-ties, staff began participating in events and conferences to educate others about the plight of women in Uganda. BeadforLife's anti-poverty mission extended to community development: Profits fund programs in health, housing and sustainable living.

Chronic health issues such as tubercu-losis, malaria or dysentery plague much of Uganda's population. BeadforLife focuses

on health through education, medical assistance, and "swaps" in which the organization pays half the cost of care, trading beads for the remainder, and for items such as insecticide-treated mosquito nets, first aid kits, reading glasses and family planning services through Marie Stopes International. BeadforLife has also partnered with local health professionals to provide free HIV testing for children of bead-ers who are HIV-positive.

To help women transition out of BeadforLife, the organization has taught them a variety of skills, including how to manage a small business, how to access modern financial services, and how to create and maintain a household budget. "We set up savings accounts for the bead-ers," Hibbard says. "None of them had had relationships with a bank before." Additionally, BeadforLife sponsors vocational training for young people in areas such as catering, carpentry, computer skills and mechanics.

Above all else, the bead-ers feel that owning a house or a small plot of land is the key to stability and continued success. They explain it like this, says Hibbard: "If you own a plot of land you always can grow food for yourself, and you have a place to go. In Uganda, if you own a home, you are never truly poor."

BeadforLife has entered into a partnership with Habitat for Humanity in Uganda and is hoping to purchase 40 acres of land outside Kampala to create a village in which the bead-ers can build their own homes. Each beader will supply 20 percent of the cost (about \$300) in the form of construction materials, and receive a loan to be repaid over 10 years to cover the remainder.

Mary Naiga is one of the top savers among the bead-ers. She has saved \$617 toward the cost of a home. Her biggest dream is to have a house of her own to pass on to her children. She continues to roll beautiful beads and has started a small bead supply business selling to other bead-ers. Because of her stable income, Naiga is now taking the AIDS drugs she'd declined before, and her health has improved dramatically.

"Everybody's faces are filling out," says Hibbard, smiling. "Getting round. Beautiful."

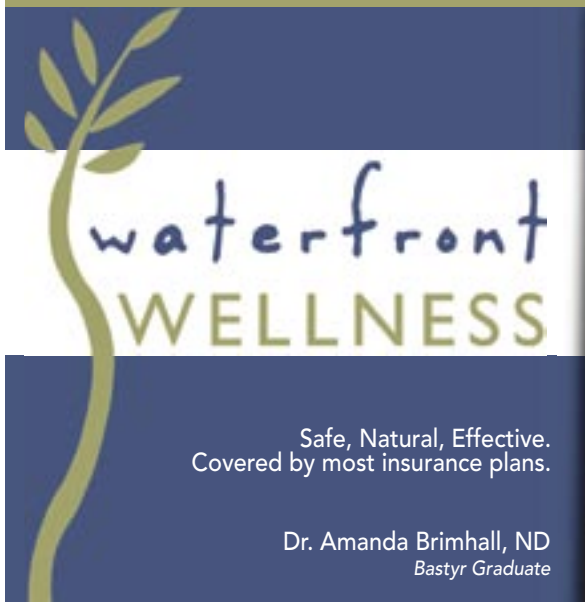
To find out how to host a party or for more information about BeadforLife, visit www.beadforlife.org. ■

Karen Reed-Matthee is the editor and cofounder of Seattle Woman.

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