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# EDUCATE!

## Beads Soften Uganda HIV/AIDS Crisis

By Aero Lillian Olok

**I**n my village in Uganda, I see women struggling with HIV/AIDS every day. I mourn with them and for them as they suffer. Where I live, financial hardship lurks everywhere. Women don't have access to antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) or pain medication, so even simply treated symptoms like coughing and body aches must be endured. They don't eat regular meals or get proper nutrition. And their communities shun them. The afflicted are stigmatized for their infection and they are feared.

In my village, sometimes women acquire HIV/AIDS through their own carelessness. They have unprotected sex with a carrier, engage in oral sex or kiss a partner with wounds in his mouth. Other times, tragically, the woman is blameless; her mother was infected with the disease, infecting her daughter before she takes her first breath.

In my village, women pray for the cure that has yet to be found. And they wait.

But I got tired of waiting.

I had attended a workshop called "Where is the Good Samaritan Today?," an event organized by the Bible Society of Uganda. We discussed our disgust with the problems associated with this dilemma, not with the people affected.

That workshop, coupled with the Educate! led me to do something. I am a Ugandan high school student, nearly a woman, set out to help Ugandan women.

My research led me to those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. I could see the hurt and hardship they faced. Each day, they would struggle to earn enough to support themselves and their children. Working under a scorching sun in a stone quarry barely brought in enough money to survive.

So I came up with a plan. I taught them how to take recycled paper and roll it into beautiful beads. They then string these beads together into bracelets, earrings and necklaces, creating jewelry that can then be sold to generate income.

Working to earn money gives these women purpose, allowing them to feel that they are a needed part of Uganda's growing population. They can contribute to the economic welfare of their families, enabling their children to attend good schools. Though they suffer from HIV/AIDS, they are bettering the lives of their children, their communities and their country.

In my village, HIV/AIDS is real. I can't cure it, but, I will combat it. I will hope. They will hope. We will hope. And together, we will overcome. ●



Aero Lillian Olok, Founder of Namugongo Good Samaritan Organization and Educate! Scholar

### About Educate!

Aero Lillian Olok is a Ugandan woman and Educate! Scholar--Educate! is a non-profit that empowers the next generation of socially responsible leaders who will develop creative solutions to the challenges facing their country. Lillian founded the Namugongo Good Samaritan Organization (NGSO) when she was a high school student. The NGSO teaches HIV/AIDS-affected widows how to make jewelry out of recycled paper and includes a cooperative to give them access to markets for their product. Lillian has given these women hope for the future.

Educate! founded in 2002, empowers students across Uganda to drive the social, political and economic development of their communities. We teach a two-year curriculum on how to lead social change, provide long term mentoring, and create a life-long, national network that equips students with the skills and confidence necessary to transform their communities.

Educate! students create locally-grown, market based initiatives that solve the challenges of poverty, disease, and environmental degradation. Today, Educate! is empowering 830 young leaders at 24 high schools across Uganda and has impacted over 10,000 people. A recent winner of the Champions of Quality Education in Africa competition, a collaboration between Ashoka's Changemakers and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Educate! was also recognized by Entrepreneur magazine as one of 100 Brilliant Companies in 2009, by DoSomething as an organization started by one of America's top five change-makers under 25 and by the Echoing Green fellowship, recognizing the highest potential startup social change ventures worldwide.