

Succeeding Against the Odds – Support for a Ugandan Community

by Sheila Havard

In 2007, the Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC) entered into a partnership with the African Great Lakes Initiative. AGLI is an offshoot of the US Friends Peace Teams and it is best known for its outstanding peace-building activities in East Africa.

Less well known is the Bududa Vocational Institute, an AGLI project in Uganda. It's now in its second year and run with remarkable dedication and determination by Barbara Wybar, a Philadelphia Friend originally from Montreal.

Bududa District is nestled in the foothills of Mount Elgon, which straddles the Kenyan border in the far east of Uganda. Isolated and impoverished, Bududa is both stunningly beautiful and lush, with its annual 180 to 200 centimeters of rain.

The birth rate is as striking as the luxuriant vegetation and the mountains. Uganda has one of the highest fertility rates in the world and fertility amongst the Bugisu tribe is high even by Ugandan standards. Families of eight are common and consequently there is relentless pressure to extend the cultivated area. In two generations crops have crept up to the very summits of the volcanic peaks, and farmers are even encroaching on Mount Elgon National Park. Unemployment and underemployment are rife. Villagers are keenly aware that the only escape for their children is education. I was solicited for money by one local Friend, not to treat the oozing sore on his leg, but to pay for his children's school fees.

AGLI established the Bududa Vocational Institute to make some dent in this need. Since it opened its doors in early 2008, the first batch of students has succeeded in passing their government examinations and have graduated. Many have found employment.

The Institute contends with obstacles inconceivable in the West. One is its remoteness. Visitors to Bududa jolt along a tortuous red *murram* (mud) road, winding around *shambas* (small holdings) of plantains and bananas. These roads are so deeply pot-holed that vehicles are often forced to a halt and they must dodge this way and that around obstacles. The only means of transport to town is a *matatu* or communal taxi,

which is invariably a decrepit second-hand Toyota minivan. Electricity is coming, but last January I could only pick out three electric lights in the entire valley, making the unmarred star-studded sky a wonder to behold. Telephone lines were brought in, only to be cut up for washing lines! A reasonably reliable Internet connection exists for those who rise at 5 a.m. These communication problems are just some examples of the challenges facing the school. One might also mention cultural factors, the primary one being the clash between Western concepts of efficiency and punctuality, and local values.

In tandem with vocational training, the Bududa Vocational Institute runs a project for local orphans. In many cases one or more of these impoverished children's parents are dead. Although one parent may still be alive, families are often dysfunctional. The caregiver may be unable to support the family due to alcoholism or mental health issues, or the father may have deserted the family for a second wife. In short these are needy children. There are thousands of such children in Bududa District. The Children of Peace program provides supplementary education and enrichment. The children attend Saturday school at the Vocational Institute where schoolwork is reviewed, and they are given opportunities to enjoy art and sport activities, which are sorely lacking from their everyday lives. Medical problems that might otherwise go undetected come to light, and teachers can arrange for treatment. Basics such as school uniforms, pencils, soap, and Vaseline, are distributed periodically. Such supplies are essential in an area where students are often kept home from "free" government schools because their parents cannot afford the required scholastic materials. Lastly, two much-appreciated hearty meals are cooked for the children: porridge in the morning and rice, beans, and cabbage for lunch. These provide a valuable supplement to an otherwise meagre diet.

Sponsors are urgently needed for about fifty of the two hundred orphans currently enrolled. In addition to the material benefits provided to a needy child, a caring relationship is created with the overseas sponsor, and children with sponsors feel that someone, however far away, is looking out for them.

Sponsorships have fallen out of favour in some circles interested in child poverty. One argument is that they increase inequality. However, in the case of the Children of Peace, sponsorships actually decrease inequality, since the children are admitted to the program on the basis of "dire need". Others who object