

BEADING FOR THEIR LIVES

Three Colorado women keep it personal, woman to woman, from beaders working their way out of poverty in the slums of Kampala, Uganda, to parties in hundreds of homes across North America where the jewelry is sold.

When a tsunami lifted the tides in Southeast Asia last year leaving 150,000 dead, most believed nothing could have prevented it. But the same number—a tsunami's worth each month, says the rock star Bono—die needless and premature deaths in Africa due primarily to disease, malnutrition, and starvation. While many stand hopeless before this rising tide of misery, others are convinced that someday it can be lowered substantially.

For Alice Aduna that day dawned in the fall of 2005. Living in Kampala, Uganda, Alice was widowed after her husband died of AIDS, leaving her with no income, savings, or way to make a living. She lived in a one-room mud house with her sons Valentine, 3, and Emmanuel, 6.

Both Alice and Emmanuel were HIV positive and sick. Alice was receiving some medical care, but Emmanuel was not. He was in danger of dying. One of Alice's few routes out of poverty? Working at the local quarry, breaking

rocks in the blistering sun with a small stone mallet for \$1 a day.

But Alice, among the fortunate few, happened to meet three American women who have dared to bring hopeful dreams into Kampala's slums.

Connecting woman to woman

A faint spark of hope that has since grown to a flame was first struck in the spring of 2004 when Torkin Wakefield and her friend Ginny Jordan were walking in the slums of Kampala where Wakefield's husband, Charles Steinberg, works as an AIDS doctor at Mulago Hospital. The two happened upon an Acholi woman, who had

by Susan Skog

been displaced from her pastoral homeland in northern Uganda by the civil war. She was sitting in the sun rolling beads from recycled magazine pages. When they asked to see more of her work, Mille Grace Akena ran into her

had been displaced from their homes by the civil war. Some belonged to both groups. Most of them were living in one-room huts, with no running water or electricity. They owned few possessions, maybe some cooking pots, a few

mud house and came out with red, blue, green, and yellow necklaces cascading from her arms.

Akena and a handful of others had for four years gathered outside their homes, making the beaded jewelry and stuffing it in black plastic bags in hopes of finding a market someday.

Wakefield and Jordan discovered that the beaders, mostly women but also a few men, belonged primarily to two groups: those living with HIV or AIDS and those who, like Akena,

items of clothing. Many cared for children orphaned by the war or diseases ranging from AIDS to malaria.

Despite their draining poverty, the beaders had a wealth of spirit and determination, the Colorado women saw. With some help locating markets, they sensed, the beaders could extend a lifesaving bridge between themselves and prosperous women elsewhere. They could, literally, begin to bead themselves out of poverty.

Buying beads. With the expansion of its operations in Uganda, BeadforLife has been able to hire these two women as buyers of the handmade beads that will be sold in BeadWear parties in the United States.





Psychotherapists in their Boulder, Colorado, community, Wakefield and Jordan had championed many health-care and education issues. Neither had business experience, much less experience running an international concern. But they vowed not to let this limit them.

“Even with no business background, I intuitively knew there was a market,” says Wakefield. “I immediately had an idea that this could happen. Inside, I still had a really big question mark, ‘Am I the one?’ This is a business, and I’ve not done a business. But when I got back to America with the first hundred necklaces, people were so enthusiastic. And once they knew the story of the beaders, they wanted to participate. I had the immediate knowledge that my friends were interested in something larger than pretty necklaces.”

That something larger is a growing hunger in America to make a difference in Africa. The international language of beads, used over the ages to tell the story of a people, is touching a nerve in those burdened with great abundance. Americans, ravaged by excess consumerism, technology, and loneliness, are hungry to do something meaningful for people ravaged by disease, war, and genocide.

When they were able to sell about 2,000 pieces of jewelry at a local farmers’ market, Wakefield and Jordan knew something was being born. With Devin Hibbard, Wakefield’s daughter, who has a background in international development and nonprofit management, they launched BeadforLife in late 2004. Drawing on what has turned out to be innate business savvy, the three women have parlayed BFL into a

sophisticated service organization lifting Ugandans out of poverty. Applying its own grassroots, multipronged master plan to eradicate poverty, one bead at a time, the organization is a model for what can be done in Africa when its people are empowered, educated, and partnered with the right resources and organizations.

Securing new lives with bead money

This is how it works. BFL sells about 8,000 pieces of handmade jewelry each month, which generates income for more than 200 beaders and their extended families—about 1,500 people. The vibrant necklaces, chokers, purses, and anklets are sold through a network of people, mostly women, who sponsor in-home or community BeadWear parties.

More than 500 BeadWear parties have been held so far from Kansas City to Los Angeles. Most of the proceeds are then returned to the beaders and their families. For the first time, many of the Ugandan women are making money, investing it, and discovering how their earnings can secure a better future. “We’ve addressed the beaders’ whole understanding of how money works and the importance of savings accounts. In the developing world, disaster happens all the time. A child gets malaria and dies. Your house burns down. Your husband drinks up all the money, and meanwhile your mother needs an operation,” Wakefield says.

“These are everyday disasters, and you are the only one who pays for them. So now the beaders are saving like crazy. They maybe get \$50 at a sale and instead of buying a new dress or shoes, they are putting about 40 to 50 percent of their earnings in the bank for a rainy day because there will be lots of rainy days.”

Leaving poverty behind

The beaders’ new financial empowerment is a radical shift in this traditionally male-dominated

country. And it is just one barometer of the cultural transformation the project has sparked. For instance, BFL also helps the beaders realize it is acceptable, even necessary, to save their money so they can pay for school fees to educate their children—often for the first time. Also, they come to see that when the money is in the bank, it’s less accessible to relatives who may want to use it immediately. Ultimately, the beaders are realizing that their own choices can make all the difference in whether they can eventually support themselves.

BFL’s success also depends on a critical operating principle that many aid organizations and NGOs shun. BFL believes in building deep connections with the people it serves. While many aid efforts deliver aid and then leave—or avoid personal entanglements for fear of getting overwhelmed by the suffering—BFL is committed to having a heart-open, long-term, visible presence in Kampala. Wakefield spends part of each year living in Kampala. Hibbard lived there for 14 months, and now she and Jordan primarily manage the headquarters, based in Boulder.

To better understand and support the beading families, the women have surveyed the beaders, gathering data about their history, health, skill and education levels, family structures, and aspirations. They now know the beaders’ greatest dream is to own their own homes, maybe with a small parcel of land. They’ve also tested the beaders’ children for HIV and helped those who tested positive get treatment, when possible.

Instead of feeling oppressed by this much closeness and knowledge, Jordan says she is inspired by the women she knows. “As women, we trust ourselves to get close to the women in Uganda. That intimacy actually builds the project at a whole new level. I sit with the women in their huts and say, ‘How do you cope with so much suffering and loss?’ And every woman says the identical thing: ‘I am not doing this alone. My sister carries it with me. If I lose a baby, my sister carries it with me.’”



Opposite: The beaders. Most, like these, are women living in Kampala and dealing with the effects of HIV/AIDS or displacement due to civil war.





The inspiration of intimacy

“This intimacy is an inspiration to us,” says Jordan. “Here in America, we just don’t know how to do that. We have to learn that somehow we can afford to be intimate with each other, even with loss and death, and something will prevail. This project really speaks to that. The women can come as close to us as they want, and that gives permission to open a door where little miracles will rise up.”

And sometimes those miracles save lives. Once Jordan was sitting with some women, idly talking about American and African men and how different husbands were in their respective cultures. All of a sudden Jordan noticed something under a blanket on a woman’s lap. “She showed me her baby, who hadn’t been eating for ten days. I was stunned. We hydrated the baby, who is fine now, but that’s when we started to plan for rehydration kits for the beaders’ families.”

“Living poor in Africa is about death always being close,” Wakefield says. “It’s about children dying in three days from malaria, or TB

being shared by everyone living in a small, windowless room. Over half of our beaders live with HIV/AIDS. Many of their children are positive, too. Finding care and medicine can consume all their time, energy, and money. Every one of our beaders has lost many relatives to AIDS. This illness has a huge stigma, and so it goes unacknowledged, even until death. Living well with HIV is a heroic task, and for our beaders, it is only one of many life-threatening situations.”

Because of such staggering needs, BFL uses its close ties with the beaders to organize regular community forums about ways to improve their health, from using burn shields with children around open fires to reproductive health issues. “Keeping the entire family alive is a challenge,” Wakefield continues. “Everywhere, they are beset with challenges. Do they have enough food? Diseases surround them. Clean water is hard to get. Smoke from cooking fires causes eye problems, even blindness. Dehydration from diarrhea kills many children. In the past year, two of the beaders’ children died of the diarrhea that is rampant among children in the Kampala slums.

“There is also emotional and physical abuse in a culture where men dominate women, often brutally. Access to health care is extremely poor and expensive, which usually means many of the beaders can only afford an occasional aspirin.”

So Wakefield, Jordan, and Hibbard began to use the beads as currency, permitting the beaders to trade their jewelry for first-aid kits, which contain rehydration powder, bandages, aspirin, and a coupon to get tested and treated for malaria through a local NGO. They can also barter for things like eyeglasses and malaria nets (mosquito nets). “When women received their first malaria nets, they ran down the streets celebrating ‘No more malaria!’” Wakefield says.

Growing by partnering

BFL is grounded in strong local partnerships, such as with the Nsambi Home Health-Care Center and Mulago Hospital’s Pediatric Infectious Disease Center. It also has a partnership



with the internationally acclaimed NGO Marie Stopes International to provide family planning services and information to the beaders. About 75 percent of those who want to limit or stop having children are enrolled in this program. “We are open to collaboration,” says Wakefield. “We want to support other people doing good work.”

The Pediatric Infectious Disease Center has began a new club, sponsored by BFL, to support teenagers who are living with HIV. “We want them to learn how to practice safe sex and feel good about themselves as young men and women,” says Wakefield. “They need lots of support. And if they feel good about themselves, they can try to prevent HIV infection in the next generation. We can make activists out of these youngsters.”

Knowing education can help lead to a sustainable, long-term community, BFL has made vocational training a centerpiece of its thriving model. “We emphasize creating work, rather than providing work,” Wakefield says. “We know that vocational training, historically and strategically, helps people leave poverty behind.”

Many of the beaders and their families have agrarian roots and, hence, knowledge about herding goats, raising corn, and rotating crops, but they have little knowledge about city living. Learning to live in a money-based economy where they have to earn, not grow, their own food is the first step.

“This year we will help twenty-five young people in our vocational-training pilot project find good employment opportunities,” Wakefield continues. “One is a young woman in catering school. Another is a refugee enrolled in driving school. We have orphaned children in carpentry and computer schools. If people have a skill that helps them in today’s urban work world, they are done with poverty. They can move past it, and that is incredible.”

Pfizer Corporation is a sponsor of the vocational training pilot. At the same time, Wakefield is also reaching out in Colorado to local Rotary, church, mothers, and school groups for

help. BFL volunteers are approaching corporations that see the wisdom in supporting the training. The goal is eventually to have one hundred children in the training program.

This year, BFL will hire an employment counselor who will work with each beader and child to help them plan for their future and get a job through the vocational program. “Maybe they want to open a beauty salon, so we can help them get a microloan to get it going, or start a poultry coop and sell eggs,” says Wakefield.

Alternative income streams

With great ingenuity, the beaders are also finding many alternative income streams. Several dozen of them have used their earnings to start alternative enterprises, such as bead supply businesses. These entrepreneurs supply everything from colorful paper and magazines to fishing line, varnish, and clasps for the jewelry. Joan Ahimbisibwe, an HIV-positive mother of three, saved enough to buy a pig and rent a small storefront where she sells sugar, vegetables, and other items.



Openhearted oneness. BeadforLife deliberately transcends the traditional boundaries between aid donors and recipients. *Opposite:* Devin Hibbard, one of three cofounders, lived in Uganda for 14 months. *Below:* Torkin Wakefield, Hibbard’s mother and also a cofounder, spends several months each year in Uganda.





Most of the beaders have already improved their homes. BFL is also collaborating with Habitat for Humanity, which hopes to make the beading community its first Ugandan Habitat community in the spring. “We have located thirty-eight acres we really love for the Habitat project. And we have a committee of beaders and different tribes and religions who we hope will approve it,” says Wakefield.

Despite the project’s success, Torkin says there are daily reminders that Africa can “pick you up and throw you down.” Every day is a jarring juxtaposition between the mundane and the tragic. Once Wakefield brought a backpack to one of the schoolchildren sponsored by the project. The little girl was ecstatic about the backpack, looking at all the supplies inside, opening and closing the zippers. “Then I found out that this precious child, so full of life, had previously been raped on her way to school. Every day, you are broken and uplifted, broken and uplifted.”

The tough realities often require surrendering to belief in a guiding power, Wakefield says. “We had no idea how this would take shape and form, but we really trusted that a larger hand would move us. We were willing to learn, make

mistakes, and know when it was time to bring allies and partners on board.”

Though she, Jordan, and Hibbard lacked past business skills, they were smart, Wakefield says. “We knew where to go to build the project, and we carried that confidence of our intentions. As Mother Teresa said, ‘You just begin. And then you keep saying yes.’”

That philosophy has reaped immense rewards and accomplishments in just a year. So far, about 70 percent of the beaders report improved health.

About 75 percent of the beaders have been able to enroll a child in school who wasn’t previously attending. (BFL is sending more than fifty children to school.) Over a fifth have used earnings to start other small businesses. The beaders also taxed themselves and constructed their own

community building, where they can gather each month to sell their beads and hold community planning meetings.

And what became of Alice Aduna and her two boys? When she first came to the BFL Kampala office, she and her children were slowly starving. The short-term solution was to give her a small cleaning job. And then she learned how to roll beads.

When Alice sold her first beads, she fell to her knees, tears streaming down her face. “Is this money really mine? All of it? God is good!” She had earned \$18, the largest amount she had made in her lifetime.

As she continues to improve her beading skills, Alice can make up to eighty dollars a month, which goes a long way in Uganda. Ten dollars pays the rent for a month. Twenty-five dollars provides AIDS medicines for one month. Four dollars buys a pair of shoes.

Touched by the beads

The BeadWear parties have reached more than 20,000 people in the United States and Canada. Almost every person Wakefield talks



with wants to get involved, sometimes deeply involved. The organization has hundreds of volunteers streaming across North America, spreading the news on the Internet and by word of mouth. "This revolution of women is responding to the inherent power of beads, which mark the courage and dignity of a culture," says Wakefield.

"The women holding BeadWear parties find that their hearts are deeply touched. One woman said, 'I opened up the box of jewelry and thought of all those hands that rolled the beads and I burst into tears.' Beads are a very special commodity. They have a magic to them and have from the beginning of time."

Often at the BeadWear parties, women watch a DVD from the African women. BFL is now making a new DVD featuring the songs and voices of the beaders. Other times, women make African food and write letters to the Kampala beaders. The woman-to-woman connection fills a deep spiritual need in America as well, according to Jordan.

"In America, we live in these small nuclear families, half of which are broken, so there is a kind of aloneness. And I do think that a lot of our lives are about consuming and other experiences that don't feed the heart in ways that the heart needs to be fed. They aren't bad choices, but they can be numbing. So we think if we just have another experience or get a beautiful dress, it will feed the heart, but we don't get what we really want.

"It is only through human connection that the heart is fed. This project offers us all an understanding that we are all connected, and we all have value. And through our bead circles, we can all rise together." ●

For more information or to host a BeadWear party, please contact BeadforLife at www.beadforlife.com or (303) 554-5901.

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Opposite: The first BeadWear party (left to right: Wakefield, the party hostess, and Hibbard). The bright beaded jewelry touches a warm spot in the hearts of women whose daily lives are often focused on their own immediate concerns. **Above:** BeadforLife provides scholarships for more than fifty previously impoverished students in the elementary and secondary grades, including the children shown here.